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INWARD HO!

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Inward Ho!

By
Christopher Morley



Now it appears to me that almost any man may like the spider spin from his own inwards his own airy Citadel—the points of leaves and twigs on which the spider begins her work are few, and she fills the air with a beautiful circuiting.

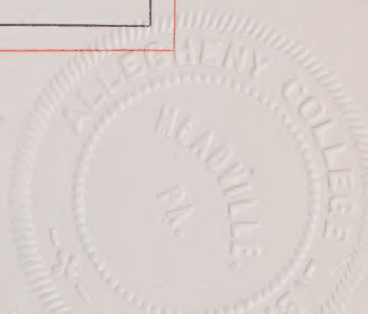
—Keats, *letter to Reynolds*

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To

JOSEPH CONRAD

*A Novelist Who Understands
as Poets Do*

33416



*Reader, This Enchiridion I present thee with
is the Fruit of Solitude: A School few care to
learn in. tho' None instructs us better. Some
Parts of it are the Result of serious Reflec-
tion: Others the Flashings of Lucid Inter-
vals: Writ for private Satisfaction, and now
publish'd for an Help to Human Conduct.*

—WILLIAM PENN, *Some Fruits of Solitude*

Advertisement to the Reader

You can't build a bonfire without the smoke getting into someone's eyes—chiefly your own. The reek from this little brush-pile may perhaps have made me, once or twice, a trifle bloodshot.

But, like most poets, I have always hankered to put down some of my private pensiveness about the nature and purport of literature (and especially poetry). This is not a book of literary criticism, but something much less skilful and much more important—an attempt to probe those disturbances and ecstasies that engender literature. It is an attempt to avert my eyes from facts. I even

Advertisement to the Reader

thought of it as a sort of eccentric textbook for students. Hoping to ingratiate myself with serious people, I proposed to call it *Preliminary Ejaculations Tending Toward an Understanding of the Meaning of Poetry*. But when I wrote that down on the title-page it looked too formidable.

The book is short: but it seems very long to me, for every line in it has been lived before setting it down.

Practically all these soliloquies appeared first in the New York *Evening Post*, to which I can never be grateful enough for shelter and encouragement. I wonder if any other newspaper in the world would have been so patient?

Roslyn, Long Island, July, 1923.

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INWARD HO!

INWARD HO!

I. Not to Become a Slave

NOT to become a slave, the first thing to determine is what is essential; and what may safely be neglected.

So, in a gush of incautious honesty, uncertain whether ecstatic or despairing, I depose my testimony.

* * * *

Panem et circenses: delicatessens and movies—these are all the populace insist upon, according to one theory.

And another antique philosopher said that the three elements that confuse and trouble human life are: the doings of kings, the passion of love, the nature of the gods.

And I concur: for the three problems of the twentieth century—and

INWARD HO!

of any century—are War, Sex, and God.

(There is not a line in this inward manifest that could not be excellently expanded.)

* * * *

In every book ever published a thoughtful reader will somewhere write (?) and (!) on the margin.

But notwithstanding, let us read and think; for to-morrow we die.

Chasten the spirit, O Demiurge, for out of trouble and perplexity and happy anguish comes poetry that eases the heart.

And laughter is valiant; laughter purges and triumphs: but even laughter is not the whole. Laughter may whiles be cowardice, and mockery but sloth.

Blessed is he who has never been tempted; for he knows not the frailty of his rectitude.

And blessed is the satirist; and

Not to Become a Slave

blessed the ironist; blessed the witty scoffer, and blessed the sentimentalist; for each, having seen one spoke of the wheel, thinks to have seen all, and is content.

* * * *

A young coloured buck and his doe drolled up on Sunday afternoon in the Easter rutting season, parading the pavement of Amsterdam Avenue, is nearly the most divinely comic sight in life.

Yet I do not laugh; for I know one sight more comic: myself.

* * * *

As a mother cares for her children, and never sleeps so deeply but she can hear them cry; as she fills a drawer with little shirts and laven-dered dresses for the baby who is coming (dresses so much longer than the infant itself), even so I lay away clean and softly folded words for that which is to be born. For I, too, am

INWARD HO!

expectant; in the beautiful German phrase I am *guter Hoffnung*: I wait the arrival of Truth.

I have a tenderness for life and a loving-kindness for Truth; not even a puny one shall be born in my mind but I will nourish it and do it honour.

But Truth is always twins; for every truth is accompanied by its facsimile error—which is the application of that truth by literal-minded people.

Yet the only thing I fear is to die barren: to pass out before bearing my Truth and Beauty, in honour of this life so splendid. Though I cry aloud, though I die in truthbirth, let it be.

* * * *

I find, as I grope, that there is much meat in the ancient wisdom of men, much loveliness in their old troubled words. And though each must rediscover the whole world for himself,

Not to Become a Slave

yet there is pride in knowing it has all been done before.

I do not expect you to understand me; and if you do not I shall pretend I do not care; but in your heart you shall envy me for trying to say my sooth.

I shall fail, as all men do; but I shall be happy. And I shall laugh, as I have always laughed; and I shall go through my terrors in secret.

I have said (not intentionally, but as all men clumsily do) so many words that did not honourably represent me; now I cut valiantly to the bone.

This is no perjury; this is no peristalsis. I elect my words gravely: each of them is older than I.

* * * *

For there is not a day nor an hour when I do not see more beauty than I can comprehend. What I choose here to set down is only what cohered in the chinks of a sieve.

INWARD HO!

Suppose someone tried to write your biography. What nonsense! How much would he know? Would he know what you thought when you looked in the mirror of the subway slot-machine? How brutally you spoke to the children when you were angry? How Nature rode you with a busy spur? How you fell on your knees late at night?

Perhaps this is an age when men think bravely of the human spirit; for surely they have a strange lust to lay it bare.

* * * *

Perhaps the Church is trying to lock the stable door after the Messiah has been stolen.

Perhaps the mind of man is like a writer, shut in a small sanctum, busy upon his high, pure resolutions, his lovely self-imposed tasks, and appalled because he must rush into the next chamber to calm the agony and

Not to Become a Slave

clamour of well-loved erring urchins.
Naughty children scuffle at the door
and cry *Come and play with us!*

* * * *

There is an innate decorum in man, and it is not fair to thrust Truth upon people when they don't expect it. Only the very generous are ready for Truth impromptu.

Generally speaking, I am not at home to Truth during office hours; late at night, after three cups of coffee, I hear her tap, and sometimes admit her. Truth lies at the bottom of a thermos bottle.

Perhaps there is no worthier granule of human sagacity than the conception of Truth being naked. If you will think about it, you will find endless value in the fable.

Be prepared for Truth at all hours and in the most fantastic disguises. This is the only safety.

Sporting reporters go South in

INWARD HO!

March to get a sound perspective for the baseball season.

Literary reporters go inward, toward the equinox, to prepare for the spring issue of "realism."

And so much of what they call heresy, and new forms of art, is only saprise and erethism.

How silly to speak of the equinox. Day and Night are never equal. Day belongs to man, and Night to God.

* * * *

Students have looked everywhere for some one factor that might come to the rescue of a troubled earth. They have suggested Free Trade, Steam, Irrigation, Short Skirts, Electricity, Radio, White Coal, Liquid Fuel, Vaccination, the Atom, Passive Resistance, Glands, Competition, and Vitamines.

I am tempted to pin my faith on something more handy—Woman.

For if it is true (as it seems to be)

Not to Become a Slave

that Woman will develop a mind commensurate with the clear validity of her instinct, humanity's problems may yet be solved.

And yet Woman is much the same as ourselves, only more so; viz., more determined.

* * * *

It seems to me interesting that the book with the most vegetarian title is, of all others, the most carnal—*Leaves of Grass*.

There are no strict vegetarians. Even Bernard Shaw eats eggs.

I had a million questions to ask God; but when I met Him, they all fled my mind; and it didn't seem to matter.

But even Abraham Lincoln returned from Gettysburg murmuring that he had forgotten the things he Really Wanted to Say.

Truth and Beauty (perhaps Keats was wrong in identifying them: per-

INWARD HO!

haps they have the relation of Wit and Humour, or Rain and Rainbow) are of interest only to hungry people. There are several kinds of hunger.

If Socrates, Spinoza, and Santayana had had free access to a midnight icebox we would never have heard of them.

* * * *

Shall I be ashamed of my little mewling truths? Like the erring servant girl in *Midshipman Easy*, I ask to be forgiven: they are such tiny ones.

But it is hard, I tell you, not to decline into mere humour.

It is hard to be as fatally serious as is requisite.

For I weary of wild words, words preposterously clever; and I ask, for this moment, only the grave, clear sanity of the poet.

O my brother, every problem that has troubled you has troubled me also.

But little by little I learn what can

Not to Become a Slave

be disregarded, and what cannot;
what messages need not be answered
whether from men or stars.

* * * *

Loud sang the hearts of the Freu-
dian adventurers—

Inward . . . Inward Ho!

INWARD HO!

II. Have Faith in Poets

AN ACORN sprouts two ways: one shoot downward into earth, one upward into leaves and sunlight. So, please, with poems. Every poem-bulb gropes doubly: rooting toward the rich soil of truth, lifting into the free air of beauty.

For certainly it is nonsense to say that truth and beauty are the same. Truth is the strong compost in which beauty may sometimes germinate. These paragraphs, for instance, are not poetry; they are only a box of bulbs in a wintry cellar; but they are the stuff of which (with labour and luck) poetry might be made.

* * * *

The essence of poetry is the intuition of strange analogies and surpris-

Have Faith in Poets

ing similitudes. The restraint of the poet is not to ascribe too much meaning to that which is really insignificant. The courage of the poet is to keep ajar the door that leads into madness. The poet is the Pandora of the mind.

* * * *

Poetry is like an unexpected noise in the night: the creak of a door, the footstep on the porch, the soft scuffle of a moth against the screen, which rouses every sense to an instant alert. So comes poetry to the drowsy mind, which startles a moment, wonders, and returns to sleep.

* * * *

Even the most innocent of men's affairs seem doomed to cause suffering. Pushing the lawnmower through tall wet grass, and enjoying the strong aroma of the morning, I found that the blades had cut a frog in half. I have not forgotten his eyes.

* * * *

INWARD HO!

After long dipping into pale gray and blue inks, at last I have found a bottle of real fluid. *Nubian Intense Black* it calls itself—ink worthy to write honourable truth; ink that collaborates with the pen.

So I say to myself that the one essential secret (for me, at any rate) is to have faith in poets, for they speak a language I can understand. They know the meaning of that old Latin phrase *Desiderio pulchriora*: things are more beautiful when we yearn for them: and indeed the man (whoever he was) who first wrote those words is more present to my spirit than many I see daily in my affairs.

* * * *

Have faith in poets, for they have not been ashamed to tell you that men suffer. They have not been afraid to look life in the face: and often the encounter is more comforting than you had expected.

Have Faith in Poets

And the poet out-argues Nature. For Nature's only duty is to be plausible: to cry to men (Oh, golden thrilling voice!): *Yield you to my gallant impulses, be obedient to my genial sophistry: be untroubled, these are the great laws of life.* But the poet appeals to a Higher Plausibility: the very lattice of his cage, he finds, plots the world in lovely little squares. The success is not to outwit Nature (that none can do), but to outwit self; to convince the heart that it is more fun to lose than to win. Do you hear the poets crying that the very essence of Beauty is desire, frustration, non-attainment? Brave souls, they are busy convincing themselves!

So charmingly have they uttered their despairing incantations, even Nature is sometimes half persuaded they are right.

* * * *

INWARD HO!

The poet pursues the trouble in your heart as pitilessly as he has ferreted out his own. So, unless you have courage to face it, give him no access.

Did you think that yourself was the only lifelong companion you could ever have? Did you believe that you, solitary you, were the only one who would ever quite understand you? And did you sometimes weary even of that unbearable intimate? All the while the poets knew: they were waiting for you round the corner. Your terrors and disgusts were theirs, too: heats, fiery welcomes, anguishes, denials. They, too, have wooed life with good heart, have seen her eyes darken with exquisite anxiety and yet look bravely straight; have shaken off (for a moment) the heavy armour of triviality; have dared to put away mere laughter—that they might, a little later, laugh with added gust.

* * * *

Have Faith in Poets

The poet is a reporter, interviewing his own heart. As always in interviewing, it is so much easier to remember the questions we asked (how well, we plume ourselves, we phrased them!) than the exact answers given by that Celebrated Stranger. And we, by the mere fact of asking, determined the course and tone of the colloquy. To ask questions is to shake loaded dice. How easy it is to attribute to him surmises or points of view that really sprang from our own habits of thinking.

* * * *

The older generation (hotly cries a young poet) "was afraid of beauty." Ah, my dear, a little hesitation is no inglorious posture before that doorway. Did you think Beauty was so easy and merry a companion? Perhaps you were confusing Beauty with Having a Good Time. Beauty is lonely company and bitter food.

INWARD HO!

It is "too like the lightning, which doth cease to be ere one can say it lightens." And if you pause to consider, you will admit that it exists mostly in memories. Only in the quietness of afterthought can one seem to grasp it, see its outlines, catch some glimpse of its meaning.

* * * *

For Beauty lies not in ourselves merely, but in some sudden congruence between our lovelier perceptions and the actual lineaments of the world. Then, in that burning breath, we are too flustered to honour the moment. Only the wistful retrospect can sieve and separate those granules of felicity. Time ticks on, ticks on, ticks on: all we can accumulate is memories, and a riper sensibility for future accidents of happiness; which also will, in the very act of arrival, become mere memories. But by saying "mere" memories we do not de-

Have Faith in Poets

grade them: for these are the very element of art, which is only one way of honouring life. "Oh, clumsy lackwit mind!" (you are tempted to cry). "Why was I not aware, why not more sensitive, more prompt to recognize the Perfect Moment when it was here?" But it is idle to chide: we identify Beauty by the way she says good-bye.

* * * *

Put all your faith in poets. You will find few others to share Beauty with you; and it cannot be borne alone. The poet performs the greatest of social functions: he elucidates the secrets of other hearts by eaves-dropping at his own. At the bottom of almost every heart is terror. But it comforts men to know that others are also afraid. It is because we hardly know what we ourselves think that we are endlessly eager to know the thoughts of others. The poets

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discover us to ourselves; and they speak not apprehensively, not embarrassed, not beshrewed and distracted by a muddle of affairs, but in that perfection of power and happiness that comes of impassioned solitude. By making us share their sufferings they have eased themselves, and eased us, too.

* * * *

So I ask for wisdom to be silent when poets are speaking: lest, when they tremble on the syllable of lovely meanings, my cursed garrulous haste divert or dull the dear edge of their wit. How many urgencies they have neglected to tell me the truth; shall not I also shred off some trivialities for the worth of my soul? It is not poets who crush us with meaningless randomness. And I think I know, better than you, what is important for me.

Moby Walt

III. Moby Walt

NOT long ago a friendly correspondent accused me of not being in sympathy with the Younger Generation. I smiled faintly to myself. For is not my favourite (or at any rate one of my favourite poets) the youngest, the most modern, the most generously daring and terribly inscrutable of them all? Yes, I mean Walt Whitman.

An evening with Walt is not an experience to be undertaken too often, nor (as the Prayer Book says of matrimony) "lightly, unadvisedly." It is too exhausting, too like toying with dynamite. In him there are lines—hundreds of them—that pierce clean through to the root of the mat-

INWARD HO!

ter. One test of a really good parson, I have sometimes thought, is this: Could he preach an intelligible sermon on *The Song of Myself*? "It requireth courage stout." As G. K. Chesterton said, a number of years ago, "We have not yet begun to get to the beginning of Whitman."

That great shaggy tract of the spirit which Walt staked out has not yet been colonized except around its fringes. A whole school of young poets has grown up, settled like bushwhackers on the edges of Walt's territory. "Promulge the body and the soul," he said (in his quaint way; and we have been beginning to suspect, sometimes, that perhaps we have been wrong in saying so often that Walt was totally lacking in humour. But that is a topic in itself). Well, how the young poets have promulged them! With terrible promulsions. "Nor will my poems do good only,"

Moby Walt

said he; "they will do just as much evil." Aye, indeed. There are terrific things in the Whitman bush. In that back country, where the hardy spirits of young poets go pioneering, stripped down to the bare necessities of life, there are drought and pestilence. An occasional wanderer comes back witless and haggard, his face darkened with a more than tropical sun. Others come back not at all. But, for the disciplined and stout hearted, it is well to plunge in with pannikin and billy. In his rough, melodious lines are the seeds of innumerable richness. He jets poem-stuff: effuses it, as he would say. Moby Walt! He became a great poet when he quit being Walter and was Walt.

It is pleasant to imagine what a man like Keats would have thought about Walt. "Howls restrained by decorum," said Walt somewhere. Jun-

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kets, perhaps, would have found the restraint inadequate. But unless a man once in a while spends an evening really trying to get the *Song of Myself* under his hide, he knows little of what America really means—or might mean. And our imagined parson, preaching a sermon on that amazing testament, or on such a piece as *Starting from Paumanok*, or *Song of the Answerer*, what unsuspected alliance he would find. Walt, a burly old Blucher, coming to the rescue in the very crisis of Waterloo. “No man has ever yet been half devout enough.” Yes, here is the flag of our disposition, of hopeful green stuff woven. “The words of my book nothing, the drift of it everything.”

Leaves of Grass fulfils the ultimate test of genius: which is that if it is approached by those incommensurable with it, it will very likely drive them mad. In the absolute sense of the

Moby Walt

word, the great majority of readers are not "up" to it. Walt himself was very positive on this point. "Stuffed with the stuff that is coarse, and stuffed with the stuff that is fine."—"What can be answered, he answers, and what cannot be answered, he shows how it cannot be answered."—"Go lull yourself with what you can understand, and with piano tunes. For I lull nobody, and you will never understand me." The percentage of mania among Whitman devotees is very high. It is, in very truth, a dangerous book. If censors were worth their hire, they would be harking back to Walt, and not worrying about such pale and meagre indiscretions as *Casanova's Homecoming*. And yet very likely it is nobler to be crazed by Walt than never to be crazed at all. "And when you rise in the morning, you will find what I tell you is so."

INWARD HO!

It is a hard lesson he teaches us. It is a long, tough doctrine to ponder, this tossing away of natural and defensive instinct, the decent inquiry *Will people like this? Is it tactful, or will it offend? Will it be misunderstood?* Of course Walt, like every other nourishing viand, needs to be chewed, not just bolted. The gassy indigestion of many groups of young poets has been due to their swallowing Walt in lumps. Mastication promotes the dissolvent juices, mentally as well as physically.

Many of the complaints against Walt have been due equally to this lack of "grinding" (as the dentists love to say) on the part of hopeful readers. To complain of the garrulous jargon, the grotesque tags of French, the catalogues, is to look a gift Pegasus in the mouth: to be a mere veterinary to the horse with wings. "I dilate you with tremen-

Moby Walt

dous breath." Let him promulge, let him effuse. Grant him his terrific attempt to say the unsayable. His proof, as he predicted, has been sternly deferred. It shall be deferred, he said, "till his country absorbs him as affectionately as he has absorbed it." Which, doubtless, will never happen. But the least one can do is read him in his own triumphant, rigorous spirit:

Resist much, obey little,
Once unquestioning obedience, once fully enslaved,
No nation, state, city, ever afterwards resumes its liberty.

I have always wanted to insert "person" in that third line, just after "city."

It is odd, too, that Walt's prose is so little known. The least known American classic, I have often thought. But it is impertinent to be dogmatic on these topics. Of writers Walt perhaps most of all does not

INWARD HO!

transpire through mediation. There he stands, "aplomb in the midst of irrational things." "I will report all heroism from an American point of view."

In the Smoker

IV. In the Smoker

SITTING here in "The Mohawk," en route to Utica, in a wise passiveness, in a wholesome tranquillity, what are one's thoughts?

First, that writing is, after all, a subordinate and secondary art (or sport). For the greatest happiness of existence is Thinking; or, to be a little more precise, that mixture of Thinking and Feeling that constitutes an agreeable awareness of living without too definite intention of doing anything about it.

* * * *

Parenthetical Thought: What do we mean by "Feeling"? This is important, for the whole trend of

INWARD HO!

contemporary literature is an attempt to get honestly closer to the texture of consciousness. In other words, literature is now probably more genuinely "sentimental" than ever before. To the devil with those who pretend to ridicule sentiment! In Pearsall Smith's *Trivia*, for instance, a book that blithely ferrets the heart, you will see what a dainty perfume, what a volatile vinaigrette, what an intellectual smelling salts, sentiment may be.

Carl Sandburg, also, ticketed by some as a "rugged realist," is really one of the most delicately sentimental of poets. His publisher once blurbed him as a "roughneck"; but he has tasted some of the roughnectar of the gods.

* * * *

The second happiness, we suppose, is Talking; but it is very rare. Certainly writing cannot be given higher

In the Smoker

rank than third among life's pleasures.

Queer that some people seem to believe there is something inhuman and bloodless in the love of books; for indeed only passionate wooers of life are real amorists of print: for in books—some books—one finds the human heart at its most real, its most thrilling actuality. In their pages we attain something of that happy excorporation or transmigration that poets have always yearned for. In the words of Rupert Brooke's noble lines, we

Hear, know, and say
What this tumultuous body now denies;
And feel, who have laid our groping hands
away;
And see, no longer blinded by our eyes.

* * * *

Loveliest of all phrases—"a foreigner." For there are moments when the spirit realizes that it is forever a foreigner in this strange, delicious

INWARD HO!

world: that it is a stranger even to the embarrassing body it so precariously inhabits; that it can never quite comprehend the ways of earth.

Strange the world about me lies,
Never yet familiar grown—
Still disturbs me with surprise,
Haunts me like a face half known.

In this house with starry dome,
Floored with gemlike plains and seas,
Shall I never feel at home,
Never wholly be at ease?

—WILLIAM WATSON.

Occasionally, in glimpses of unexpected loveliness, in thrilling far-away voices, the mind seems to see and hear (maddeningly, enchantingly) something it momentarily understands, that makes it feel at home. And even then, these instants have a cruel habit of happening just at conjunctions when they cannot be honoured and savoured. Doggedly the uneasy spirit returns to the stammering task of making intelligible

In the Smoker

the few phrase-book catchwords it has learned. For, alas, I am forever a foreigner, and so are you.

* * * *

And there was another thought.
What was it . . . ? It's gone.

* * * *

The fascination (sitting in the last car of the train) of seeing the engine, far ahead, rounding a curve with that busy elbowing movement of pistons, and flashing jets of steam! Just so, sitting at the tail of a train of thought, one sometimes catches an enigmatic glimpse of something, one knows not just what, pulling us furiously on.

* * * *

Going up the Hudson on that mild, airy morning, seeing sparse sprinkles of whiteness powdered here and there upon the grave shouldering hills, a sort of refrain ran in my mind, a sentimental farewell to the delights of winter. *And there's still a little*

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snow on the mountains, I said to myself (humming it, if I must be horribly frank, to a little cheerful tune of my own making). *And there's still a little snow on the mountains*. Then (why does irony always lie in wait for one so harmless?) just below Albany the sun was turned off like a bulb and we ran plump into a blizzard of gale and snow. Trudging up the hilltop at Hamilton College that evening, through blinding squalls and swathes of storm, wearing a thin overcoat and thinner evening clothes, I remembered my little ditty. *And there's still a little snow on the mountains!*

* * * *

Meditation in the dining car: it is oddly erroneous to believe that quite simple and untutored people are not able to enjoy sophisticated pleasures. One would imagine, for instance, that highly flavoured cheeses, such as Camembert and Roquefort, with their

In the Smoker

delicate ammonia of putrefaction, would not be relished by a completely virginal palate. Yet dogs adore them.

* * * *

It is saddening to see that quarter-mile of ships tied along shore somewhere up the Hudson (don't remember exactly where it is). Ships craftily built, that might be out enjoying blue horizons, ignominiously tethered together like a leash of toy balloons. Unmoor the ships! They remind one of the emotions and adventurous aspirations of man, tightly hawsered in by social inhibitions. Unmoor the ships!

But, before unmooring them, be quite certain they are seaworthy.

* * * *

Many a man has been unfitted for literature, and certainly for journalism, by too injudicious a desire to tell the truth.

One of the most valuable philo-

INWARD HO!

sophical features of journalism is that it realizes that truth is not a solid but a fluid. It is not easy to tell the truth, nor is it always advisable.

* * * *

The *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, by Wittgenstein (of whom they speak nowadays as “the modern Spinoza”), ends thus:

My propositions are elucidatory in this way: he who understands me finally recognizes them as senseless, when he has climbed out through them, on them, over them. He must, so to speak, throw away the ladder after he has climbed up on it.

He must surmount these propositions; then he sees the world rightly.

Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent.

The perplexing feature is, you cannot tell whether the thing is unsayable or not until after you have made your attempt to say it. If you never attempt it, you will never know.

* * * *

In the Smoker

But an even more disturbing work is "in preparation," so we see in a publisher's announcement. It is called "The Meaning of Meaning."

* * * *

Life is a favourite book lent by the Demiurge to humanity, with the injunction to mark the things they like specially. And the Demiurge is annoyed because they insist on marking the wrong passages.

INWARD HO!

V. *A Current-event Film*

IN A current-event film I saw the Stars and Stripes lowered at Ehrenbreitstein. I wondered why I was so moved. Is it because I have never been able to think of that flag as merely an American symbol, but in some sense the flag of all the world?

Walt Whitman suggests the same thought in his *Thick-Sprinkled Bunting*:

. . . flag of man—O with sure and steady
step, passing highest flags of kings.
Walk supreme to the heavens mighty sym-
bol—run up above them all,
Flag of stars! thick-sprinkled bunting!

And I thought, seeing the pictures
of returning American soldiers with
their Rhineland wives and babies,

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that the simple human hunger of some Dakota leatherneck when he looked into the gray eyes of a Coblenz shop-girl is more powerful than wars and armies—and perhaps equally ironical.

* * * *

But it is not easy to know what you think—or even whether you *are* thinking. You are stirred with an uninterpretable thrill, that is all.

Yet on the fringes of that thrill, thought lurks. Without it there is no thinking that amounts to much. Is the mind merely a tagger-on at the heels of emotion?

* * * *

The greatest harm, perhaps, is done by those who feel it necessary to pretend to be thinking when they are really only digesting their latest meal. And probably people who are too copiously fed rarely think at all. The stomach is a dangerous traitor to the mind.

* * * *

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How dull and flat, however, life
would be if all our follies and errors
were laundered and ironed. How
few poems would be written; how
miserable the idealists would be.

* * * *

The difficulty with ecclesiastical
creeds is not that they are too hard to
believe, but too easy.

* * * *

If you believe a thing, it is true.

* * * *

The chambered nautilus is a lovely
creature; but I would not trust him as
a hydrographer.

* * * *

I had a vision—I don't remember
whether I was awake or asleep—of a
bronzed, resolute, lean troubled face
that seemed to be stemming the rush
of a great wind. It was as if a living
man were bound as the figurehead of
a ship in a gale. I thought, why
should we so lightly cast aside all the

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accumulated and inherited speculations, dreams, and agonies of the human kind? Why so gayly presume to be able to reason these things for ourselves? And why, unless human destiny is something beyond our suspicion, should the explorer—and even the far-off reader—tremble with awe at the sill of Tutankhamen's tomb?

* * * *

I have felt somewhat the same thrill looking up at an old crumbling figure of the Virgin and Child, niched high in a pinnacle over a lonely Oxford cloister. Whatever any one has believed, or thought he believed, has, to amateurs of humanity, a sacred aspect.

* * * *

There are other societies, more sophisticated than our own, in which theological indigestion is no longer News. But America is still a government of the naïve, for the naïve, and by the naïve. He who does not know

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this, nor relish it, has no inkling of the nature of his country.

* * * *

Oxford has always been considered, and with justice, the shrine of Anglican Toryism in religious matters. The home of lost causes, they used to call her; though one may think that a cause which is still espoused in so lovely a place as Oxford cannot really be utterly Lost. But even at Oxford you will find in the Examination Statutes the following generous latitude:

Candidates who object on religious grounds to the examination in Holy Scripture are entitled to offer the equivalent, which may be either Plato's *Apologia*, *Meno*, or Pascal's *Pensées*.

* * * *

The greatest poet America has produced—Walt Whitman—is the priest and apostle of naïveté: so far on round the arc of naïveté, indeed, that he

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joins hands with the ultra-sophisticates. To me, it seems that there can never be any excuse for complete dejection as long as one can read *Leaves of Grass*. But I am not always strong enough to do so.

* * * *

And again, how about the “interminable average fallows of humanity” — the “ploughing up” of whom, Walt said, was the main justification and purpose of These States. Can “natural and nonchalant persons” read Walt and get anything but the rather rank savour? Can they ever “affectionately absorb” him, as he claims to have absorbed them? That is the Whitman enigma in a nutshell. And, as he wisely said (in that temperate, statesmanlike, soberly pleaded valedictory, *A Backward Glance O'er Travel'd Roads*: which badly needs to be read by those who think Walt was only a Hairy Ape)—“nothing less

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than a hundred years from now (1888) can fully answer." Only a third of that hundred years has elapsed: and to me it seems that I cannot pick up the poems without finding, on almost every page, lines pertinently aimed toward the very boss and nubbin of To-day. But how about our natural and nonchalant persons? What do they think? Do I believe Whitman to be growing and fructifying merely because I find him sprouting and bearing crops in my own mind? There is no gauge or spirit-level that can certainly measure these impalpables.

* * * *

To take only one example. We have all, whatever our political credulity or economic leaning, had a sort of subconscious feeling that you can't ever judge France quite in the same way that you judge other nations. Her history and temper are exceptional; it is only the black-and-white

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doctrinaires and radical intellectuals who are so preposterous as not to realize that her psyche is peculiar. The multiplication table and the logarithms do not apply. But Walt saw this, and nobly said it, over fifty years ago, in *O Star of France*:

Star panting o'er a land of death, heroic
land,
Strange, passionate, mocking, frivolous
land,
Miserable! yet for thy errors, vanities, sins,
I will not now rebuke thee,
Thy unexampled woes and pangs have
quell'd them all,
And left thee sacred.

Am I wrong in thinking that this is one of the wisest, the most coldly sagacious, of political utterances? For until the uneasy spirit of France is calmed, there can hardly be much security in Europe. When the French are happy, the world is at ease. And

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in these matters the mistakes of one are the mistakes of all.

* * * *

Walt's ecstatic vision of America—a hundred million savans, philosophers, libertads, camerados, and Perfect Mothers, bustling on the trottoirs or promulging themselves on the wide prairies—was, one fears, a trifle risible. He himself suspected it as being vague, for he had a way of evading any exact programme or prophecy. "I merely ejaculate," he said. He ejaculated and passed on, leaving it to us to work out the details. And we are equally inclined to pass the buck one stage further. But one thing, at any rate, one learns from him—not to be afraid of one's secret surmisings. It is hard; for thoughts that seem so valid and interesting to one's self often prove to be merest bombast or truism when exposed in ink. But if democracy means any-

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thing, it means that occasionally one must have the courage of one's midnight suspicions, and strip them for public scrutiny. Too often we speir timidly at our own minds in the manner of the Elders watching Susannah; or like the Two Thomases—Doubting and Peeping. Therefore one occasionally discards even the defensive plural, and adopts the naked I.

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VI. *The "English Problem"*

SOME weeks ago I received the following letter from the Department of Educational Research of the Board of Education of an important Western city:

We English teachers find it very difficult to teach children how to write sentences correctly—how to develop a feeling for the completeness, clearness, and correctness of a sentence, a sentence consciousness, or a "sentence sense." It is tremendously important that we teach them how to do this.

In my study of the problem I am trying to find just what our trouble is and how to remedy it.

Will you be good enough to tell me how you think teachers ought to go at this part of the English problem?

1. How did you develop your technical skill in handling the sentence? Think of

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Benjamin Franklin's way and Stephenson's way, and then tell me your way.

2. Do you think children develop their skill by learning rules of grammar?

3. Do you think they develop their skill by practice in theme writing under the immediate stimulus of good, interesting models?

I reprint this letter, after some hesitation, because it is obviously sincere and because I should like to be able to help. I cannot answer the questions our friend puts; but they suggest some general meditations.

* * * *

Mere correctness is a very minor feature of learning to write. It becomes important later; but the first thing to realize is that language is not a commodity, but only a medium of exchange. Children, as a rule, write beautifully, charmingly, interestingly, because their thinking is novel and fresh.

Language is a vehicle for knowledge

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and feeling. Those who have neither exact knowledge nor profound feeling—which are usually the result of experience—can hardly be expected to use the vehicle in any stirring or creative manner. A taxi without a passenger cruises in a gentle fabian fashion. It is only the taxi with a fare inside that spins briskly to its destination.

* * * *

I suspect that the art of writing cannot be taught. The utmost you can do is try to make the pupil sensitive to words. There is no shibboleth, no esoteric quiddity. The enjoyment of great writers is, obviously, the most feasible assistance. Ideally, writing should become almost unconscious: as natural as breathing or digesting. It should follow thought's vestiges like a shadow. It can never be quite that; but language should not be something we climb, like a cliff; rather something in which we float, like water.

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Words are our employees, but not our helots. To enforce this by a monstrous pun, the dictionary is Uncle Tome, not Uncle Tom. Words (it is odd how few realize this) have their rights. They have their own meanings, and most of them are much our seniors. They have their birth-right meanings, their outgrown meanings, their present meanings. One test of a lover of words is that he shall know, and have some regard for, their original senses. Unless a man knows a fair amount of Latin, German, and French, and a small smatter of Greek, he walks at random through the forest of English speech.

It is astonishing, by the way, how many students are content with grotesquely inadequate dictionaries. The most valuable inexpensive book to a sincere lover of English words is *The Concise Oxford Dictionary*, which

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costs no more than a theatre ticket and will give you amusement enough for a lifetime.

* * * *

“Sentence sense.” A sentence, I suppose, is a unit of thought; an opinion, a feeling, a sentiment. If the pupils’ sentences are vague it is either because their thoughts are vague or they are (at the moment of writing) fogged in that troublesome vapour that often (with us all) rises between the mind and the pen. Literature is a vibration that passes from one mind to another; both our transmitters and our receivers are imperfect in themselves and imperfect in mutual adjustment. This regrettable haze, this “static,” is a serious difficulty. Anything that makes for uncertainty in transmission must (if possible) be discarded. An example of uncertainty: How are we to know whether our correspondent really can spell *Steven-*

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son, or whether the *ph* is only a stenographer's error?

When thought is clear, and when the use of words has become reasonably facile, the chance is that the sentence will be clear. In sum: The problem is to teach ourselves to think, and the writing will take care of itself.

* * * *

But writing is also, in its subtler phases, an art; like all arts, it must be performed either unconsciously or with extreme sophistication. A child writes well, and a highly trained and long-suffering performer may sometimes write with intelligence. It is the middle stages that are appalling. If our friend can encourage his pupils to think for themselves he will do great patriotic service. The use of words in American public life is grotesque; it is ludicrous; it is damnable. Many of our officials would be more intelligible, and certainly more humorous, if

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they were required to paint their ideas on canvas.

* * * *

The problems of writing are specially fascinating because we have to utilize an instrument which is at once debased and exalted; vulgar and sensitive; familiar and strange. For the expression of our most delicate emotions, aspirations, reasonings, we have only this same common speech, which is already roughened and marred by constant, automatic, and heedless use. When we wish to explain, with some purity and dignity, our more generous and essential feelings we must resort to the poor counters of habitual utterance that we have shuffled so often and worn so smooth. It is as though we took a delicate Swiss watch to a jeweller, showed him some stricture in the cobweb mechanism, and asked him to repair it with a knife and fork.

Fontainebleau and Vesey Street

VII. Fontainebleau and Vesey Street

WE SEEM to see a small but interesting cloud rising over the skyline, and we gird up our typewriter ribbon to utter a modest prophecy.

After consulting the stars, poking round in the back corners of foreign newspapers, and going into a pensive brief tranquillity, we are moved to say that we think we have spotted the next "sensation" in the intellectual world. By which we mean the newspaper Feature which will succeed M. Coué and various other horizon-seeking movements that have been specially busy since the war.

Keep your eye on Mr. Gurdjieff and

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his "Forest House" at Fontainebleau. Mr. Gurdjieff, we learn, conducts some sort of colony in the Forest of Fontainebleau, where with music, rhythmic gymnastics, quaint costumes, perfumed fountains, and "mystical" discipline, the inner secrets of life are resolutely pursued. With Mr. Gurdjieff, so it is said, is associated Mr. Ouspensky, the author of *Tertium Organum*, a book that has been very highly spoken of by competent authorities.

* * * *

A number of very well-known English writers have been mentioned (in the London papers) as disciples of Gurdjieff and Ouspensky; but as several of these have recently replied disclaiming the connection, we think it better not to give their names. We first heard of the "Forest House" when we read that the late Katherine Mansfield, that very interesting writer,

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had been staying there. And her husband, Middleton Murry, a clear-headed critic, writes of the "Gurdjieff Institute" (in a letter to the *London Daily News*) that "there is no charlatanry about it. Something quite real is being attempted there. What that something real is cannot be defined in a letter, or in many letters. But the most important of my conclusions (to my own mind) was that, so far as I could see, that Institute did not solve the problem it professed to solve: It merely made its adherents unconscious of the problem for a time. In other words—highly metaphorical words, no doubt—it was a drug, a very potent and searching drug, but one of whose ultimate beneficence no man living can speak with authority."

One realizes, of course, that in using the word "drug" Mr. Murry speaks—as he takes care to warn—figuratively. And he exhibits his

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usual sagacity in the distinction he draws. It is the function of almost all æsthetic and metaphysical rhapsodists to cause happiness by temporarily numbing the awareness of Insolubility. This—we say it in all sincerity—is not something to be merely chaffed. We are heartily in favour of anæsthetizing the reason as long as possible—provided you know what you are doing.

* * * *

We are pleased also that Mr. Gurdjieff has chosen the Forest of Fontainebleau as the seat of his “Institute.” We spent several weeks in the cherry-blossom season of our youth rambling round that forest; it has always had a curiously mystical and uplifting effect. There was a Scandinavian companion of ours in that spring of 1912 who was so hilarified by the loveliness of those sun-dappled aisles of woodland and the

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clear, cool elixir of the April air that he behaved almost like a Sherwood Anderson character. He forswore food, lived on dry toast and lemon juice in water, and used to strip off his clothes and run stark in the lonely alleys of the forest, praying to pine trees and uttering uncouth Scandinavian outcries of demiurge and ecstasy. We ourself managed to keep our mysticism in check by bathing in the green ice-cold water of the stripling Loing: if Mr. Gurdjieff has tried it in early April he will agree with us that it will chill the most fiery frizzlings of the insurgent heart.

* * * *

It appears from an article in the London *New Statesman* that Mr. Gurdjieff—"of Greek origin, but spent his youth in Persia"—organized an expedition thirty years ago to investigate "the wisdom of the East." He and other savants set out for Thibet,

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where they spent twenty years or more; some of them, apparently, were swallowed up by the delights of esoteric wisdom, for they have never reappeared. But Mr. Gurdjieff returned eventually, "with a mass of material." This material "covers almost every branch of human knowledge, with the exception of pure mathematics, regarding which the East appears to have nothing to teach the West." Particularly in regard to psychology, music, and medicine, the *New Statesman* writer (he signs himself "C.") is convinced, "Mr. Gurdjieff and his colleagues possess knowledge in advance of anything known to European science."

Mr. C.'s references to the Gurdjieff Institute at Fontainebleau are delightfully stimulating in their piquant indefiniteness. In the first place, we are rather relieved to learn that there is no immediate likelihood of

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Gurdjieff becoming another Coué. The movement, Mr. C. says, "has no appeal to the million. The general public will never be able to grasp the meaning of the work."

* * * *

This is the right way to go about getting us all interested. If any one tells us that there is something we can't possibly understand, naturally we are on fire to disprove the suggestion.

Of the Forest School we read:

The life is very simple and uncomfortable, the food is adequate but too starchy for an ordinary stomach, the work is extremely hard. The physical work, indeed, results often in a degree of exhaustion which perhaps exceeds anything that was produced even by a prolonged spell in the winter trenches of Flanders in 1917. Yet behind it all there is no theory either of asceticism or of the "simple life." Work at Fontainebleau is a medicine and a curse. Carried to extremes it creates in-

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creased capacity for effort and provides rich material for self-study—no more than that. Cold, hunger, and physical exhaustion are things to be endured not for their own sake, nor to acquire “merit” of any description, but simply for the sake of understanding the physical mechanism, making the most of it, and ultimately of bringing it into subjection. Other conditions provided at the “Institute”—with an ingenuity that is almost diabolical—offer similar opportunities for the study of the emotional mechanism, but that side of the work cannot be described in a few words or sentences and must here be passed over.

This, as you see, grows more and more exciting. For our own part, we have had a very strong hunch about Mr. Gurdjieff ever since we first heard of him. He seems to throw off vibrations (Mr. C., by the way, says that the only historical comparison he can think of is the Pythagorean school in Italy about 550 B. C.). There are many fascinating things going on nowadays, and humanity

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evidently has hold of the bear's tail, even if it is whirling us round the stump rather rapidly and bewilderingly.

* * * *

But we find the neighbourhood of Vesey Street just as diabolically (or divinely) ingenious for the stimulation of our "emotional mechanism" as any Gurdjieffite can find the provoking disciplines and rituals of the Forest Institute. Have you ever, for instance, seen a snowstorm from the top of the Woolworth Building? ✓ If you go up there in bad weather the curator will tell you sternly that "you won't see anything"; but how does he know what you are looking for? ✓ Or darling Vesey Street in clear winter dusks, fires burning in the roadway among piles of dirty snow; the Lightning statue flaming in the noon, darkly golden in the dayfall; the criss-cross webbing of Brooklyn Bridge against

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the sky, where you may see the whole piled miracle of Down-Town airily reticulated in oblique coördinates; these are all thorns of loveliness that prickle in the mind, and each can be his own Gurdjieff if he desires.

* * * *

Or there is also, on Barclay Street (a street of terrific miracles, that runs the gamut of human affairs from the old shard of the Astor House and the mystic loveliness of St. Peter's Church, down to the delights of Gorgonzola cheese and the Hoboken Ferry)—there is on Barclay Street a Swiss cuckoo-clock shop that offers a hauntingly agreeable scene for a story, a play, a parable, or any other sort of prettiness. To go into that shop, where hundreds of quaint and humorous timepieces are simultaneously and competitively and overlappingly at work; to hear that delicate continuous rustling, ticking, chiming,

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whistling, and stirring and teetering; the sudden soft halloo of idiotic toy-birds poking out and retiring, the tingling prick-song of unexpected music-boxes bursting into thin, airy melody—all this sort of thing is a deliciously valid allegory of the active mind itself.

* * * *

Or, if you prefer, consider the frenzy of blowing and whistling that comes wildly up Vesey Street on an evening of fog and rain, when crowded ferryboats are feeling their way back to Jersey with their high-spirited commuters. The soft and mellow threatening, pleading, of the deeper sirens; the wail and scream of tugs; the whole medley of bewildering and anguished steam-voices—with something incorrigibly humorous in effect, when heard from safe distance; and yet with a note of thrilling, simple

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urgency—here also is matter for affectionate observation.

* * * *

But Mr. Gurdjieff, we suppose, is right, if it is his idea to promote self-study and self-candour by means of his odd and arduous exercises. (Though we don't like the sound of the starchy food.) Of course, if you let the mind burn too brightly, too constantly; if you try too desperately to purge away the mere carnal, you have little but cinders left. But certainly a faithful, honest, and unflinching study of one's own heart and spirit is the only soil for literature. It is all we can trust; it is the only sand and lime and cement we can trowel into for our durable mortar. Observation and sympathy and imagination can supply the bricks; but the mortar we mix only out of our own pains and heart-blood. So, at any rate, the student meditates in moments of shame-

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less frankness; and sets down his raw and hot material, for future reboiling, scumming, fudging out in knifed criss-cross to cool in the pantry window.

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VIII. *Outlines*

AN OUTLINE History of all art and all literature: That when one is completely happy, or completely miserable, he must tell someone about it.

* * * *

It is the pride and duty of the poet to keep alive the sense of strangeness; and also (as they say in the delicious world of government) to "initiate legislation." The poet drafts the legislation of the spirit, which future ages may (perhaps) write into statute. It is the suffering of the poet to hide himself from To-day that he may be companionable with To-morrow.

* * * *

Outlines

Nature believed herself to have thought out everything in advance; all was nicely planned, from the unfolding of the rose to the patterned orbits of the stars. But she didn't allow for poetry, man's safety valve, for her intolerable pressure of vitality. Poetry is, at its highest, a subdivision of the sense of humour.

* * * *

Nothing is so pleasing to the inward capsule of pride and selfishness as the feeling of having been roughly treated; of having had, in the glorious phrase of common speech, a raw deal. It is often this feeling that sustains men's hearts when they contemplate the laws of the universe.

* * * *

Children whose parents quarrel are likely to be quarrelsome themselves. It is unfair to blame man too fiercely for being pugnacious; he learned the habit from Nature. And yet man's

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astonishing capacity for happiness is due to the fact that his two great parents, Art and Nature, are (at bottom) on terms of beautiful and secret understanding.

* * * *

Perhaps, therefore, man's weaknesses are due to inbreeding: Art and Nature being too closely kin.

* * * *

There are two poems of Robert Herrick's that appeal with particular charm to writers—*Not Every Day Fit for Verse*, and *The Departure of the Good Demon*. The latter goes thus:

What can I do in Poetry
Now the good Spirit's gone from me?
Why nothing now, but lonely sit
And over-read what I have writ.

* * * *

One of the best brief essays I know is in the *Concise Oxford Dictionary*. Let's reprint it:

Outlines

sentiment, n. A mental feeling, the sum of what one feels on some subject, a tendency or view based on or coloured with emotion, such feelings collectively as an influence; moving quality resulting from artist's sympathetic insight into what is described or depicted, tendency to be swayed by feeling rather than by reason, emotional weakness, mawkish tenderness or the display of it, nursing of the emotions. Expression of some desire or view esp. as formulated for a toast, &c. (*I call upon Mr. Jones for a song or a s.*). [OF, f. med. L *sentimentum* (L *sentire* feel).]

One of the most perfect comments on sentiment was that line in a letter of Charles Lamb, after the tragedy in his family: "I have something more to do than feel." So have we all. And yet perhaps the generous word has not yet been said about sentiment as a literary force. In this country, where spurious and jejune sentimentalism has probably become a more general diet than anywhere else at any time, there is room for

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enlightened sentimentalism. The word needs to be rescued from its niminy-piminy association. Enlightened sentimentalism, aerated by humour, stiffened with irony and self-mockery, but not devoid of compassion, is an ingredient too spicy to be omitted from the pantry shelf.

* * * *

It is well to be positive about such matters as Art, Literature, Criticism, Religion, and the Meaning of Life while one is in the mood; for the time may come when aphorisms (even one's own) will lose their savour. A man standing in line at the bank, hoping there is enough balance to his credit to cover the check he desires to cash, is in no frame of mind to relish abstract doctrine about the Rate of Exchange.

* * * *

We notice an announcement of publication of a book called *Studies in the*

Outlines

Development of the Fool in the Elizabethan Drama. It suddenly occurs to us to ask whether any other literature has paid such affectionate attention to the "fool" as has the English. This is greatly to the credit of the English-thinking mind. The modern newspaper columnist, by the way, plays in journalism (or should play) exactly the rôle of the Fool in Shakespearean drama.

* * * *

The difficulty is that under modern conditions, where the opportunities to be sagacious, prosperous, well bred, and comfortable are so agreeably tempting, a Fool and his folly are soon parted.

* * * *

We are grateful to Stuart P. Sherman for having quoted in his book, *The Genius of America*, the following lines from Emerson:

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The world is full of renunciations and apprenticeships, and this is thine; thou must pass for a fool and a churl for a long season.

It must be remembered, however, that a renunciation is no longer a renunciation as soon as you tell people about it. ✓

* * * *

Brief History of Journalism: "Correctly handled" (a reporter wrote us in re the arrival of Joseph Conrad in New York) "he was worth to the New York reader, through the medium of the newspapers, a column of eight-point with slugs."

* * * *

Sometimes, in a decent modesty, a natural fatigue, or a feigned jocularity, the journalist speaks lightly, flippantly, disparagingly of the business of writing. He is usually sorry afterward. Because writing, like every other specialty to which the workman

Outlines

is born and nourished, is the greatest privilege, the greatest happiness and zealotry, life can afford. A pox upon those who deny it! What can better the sheer burning delight of that seizure that does sometimes come: the clear flux of words, the steady push of thought emptying itself through that magical conduit of speech, the hope of some gusto and fecundity of expression. Therein lay the manliness of the Elizabethans, they wrote because they enjoyed it: why the sheer villainy of their handwriting shows what fun they had, the words tumbling down in such golden-burning heat they halted not to mend their scrawls and quillforks. Best of all, those divine moments when (as Herrick put it) "the spirit fills The fantastick Panicles Full of fier"—when in an instant flash the whole conception lies written out in the mind: the complete inkscapè seen in one synoptic comprehend.

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These moments are too gay and too merely mental to be rendered plausible. But they do happen. Eyes that were dipped in darkness suddenly see clear: the lines (unwritten, unwritable) career joyous across the paper. Do you remember that sensation so winningly described by R. L. S.—“it seems as if it were a book you had written yourself in a dream”?

* * * *

The world, in its sheer exuberance of kindness, will try to bury the poet with warm and lovely human trivialities. It will even ask him to autograph books. But God Himself did not tarry to autograph his creation. As our friend the Mandarin observes, it was Dictated but not Signed.

Pre-natal Care of Poems

IX. Pre-natal Care of Poems

COMING away from Vesey Street, shortly before 5 p. m., I looked up (as always) at the Statue of Lightning. The sky was a very pale transparent blue—not pierced through with light, but a canopy holding light in level suspension; bright with that lovely pinkness that precedes sunset. On the plumes and in the wing-pits of the gilded figure brightness was strengthened to a rosy burning. Just above, a faintly glimmering new moon. Apparently near the moon—and almost as beautiful in that tender light—rode a shining scrap of waste paper, eddied up by the flotation of chance. It was poised on a toss of draught, one of those

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queer puffs of rising air that carry downtown jetsam so high. Just so, sometimes, a shred of trifling thought or vagabond idea, caught up in a hazard gust of thought, seems as lovely and lofty and inaccessible as Selene herself.

* * * *

Some day a poem will be written on the Pre-Natal Care of Poems. This is a very lovely subject. Many poems have to be carried in the mind a long time before they can be written: the true poet is the one who knows by instinct when the moment has come for the struggle. Poor little phantoms in the imagination, how rarely are those discarnate dreams properly honoured and tended by the expectant poet.

* * * *

No matter how sagacious or how revered the teacher, at some point

Pre-natal Care of Poems

you will find yourself beginning to diverge from him. For sooner or later, every individual has to fall back on that residual and personal parcel of conviction which is true for himself alone. And this exceedingly sensitive and intimate possession—whether you call it Conscience or Identity or what not—can hardly be acquired, and hardly be transmitted. Some find their happiness in life by attempting to retire into this tract of singular being and enlarge it, staking off its frontiers against the rest of life. Others—the good mixers, as the eloquent phrase is—find their happiness in trying to diminish it, by cultivating the sense of solidarity and kinship with other human beings.

* * * *

Happiness requires a reasonable ratio between psychic income and psychic expenditure. If your emo-

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tional or intellectual income is insufficient to meet your expenses in the same realm, then you are bound to be overdrawn. The unluckiest insolvent in the world is the man whose expenditure of speech is too great for his income of ideas.

* * * *

There are a lot of people who must have the table laid in the usual fashion or they will not enjoy the dinner.

* * * *

Even the maddest kind of love is better than no love, no madness at all. Sometimes men grow weary of trying to hide how mad they are. We knew a Latin Quarter phrase-monger once who reduced love to the lowest possible level. He said that he loved his mistress because being with her brought such fine metaphors to his mind. This was intolerable; but still it was better than nothing.

Pre-natal Care of Poems

Even a dry geranium root will survive a whole winter in the cellar and after six months mouldering in the coal-bin will still put out the most delicate new shoots. The imaginative faculty among men can only be murdered by persistent strangling.

* * * *

As human perplexity increases (and no sane man can doubt it is growing) literature, and especially fiction, plays an increasing rôle in mortal cogitation. This is due to the astounding and delicious self-absorption of human beings, which must never be forgotten by rational students of life. For the eager hunger of the ego, lifted up, draws all things to itself. In stories that are gay, amusing, potent, we like to imagine that *we* might some day be as happy or as domineering as that; in tragedies we console ourselves pitifully with the thought that at any rate things haven't been quite

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so bad in our own case. The endless craving of the ego to compare or identify all art and all creation with its own experience is the secret of every book's success or failure.

Catching Up with the Past

X. Catching Up with the Past

WE WERE thinking, as we came through the Pennsylvania Station, How much of one's time should one spend in trying to catch up with the Past? In the tide of hurrying legs that pushed on toward the subway, we saw a sort of mirage of someone bending over, trying frantically to pick up the spilt miscellany of a large shopping-basket—fruit, parcels, jewellery, toys, boxes of candy, and what not—trying to gather up as much of it as possible and yet not get left behind in the onward flow.

The question of dealing with the Past, we said to ourself, is just that. And, as we neared Park Place, the picture in our mind altered. It struck

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us that man stands on a kind of escalator, whose movement, for quite a number of years, he hardly notices. And then, as he becomes aware of its smooth, steady progress, he begins hastily to snatch up some of the queer jetsam left alongside by earlier passengers.

The art, of course, is to take along with you just as much of the Past as you can comfortably carry. Some people put so much of it in their pockets that they bulge and become ill at ease.

And every form of art (we continued to solipend) has a kind of material that is justly fitted for it. The speculations above, however crude, are the kind of thing that seems to us naturally adapted to the sonnet form. Just as we feel, with irresistible certainty, that there is material for a fine sonnet in the picture of Doctor Johnson on his knees in prayer—a mental picture

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that will never have deserted any sympathetic reader of that great book *The Prayers and Meditations of Doctor Johnson*.

Every established form of art has—whether you like it or not—won to itself a congeniality of material; these congenialities may, of course, be ruptured with stunning effects of surprise and novelty; yet the novelty and surprise only exist because the form itself has seemed, subconsciously, to suggest a certain kind of mood. Sonnets in slang and ribaldry, for example, have been done with prodigious delightfulness by competent artists; just as cocktails may well be served in champagne glasses. But the full humour of the experience would be lost on one who was not familiar with the ritual of serving champagne in the fragile hollow-stemmed goblet. And no artist yet has been able to make a success of

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doing a thing in the wrong way until he had somewhat grasped the notion of doing it right. ✓

Mr. John Crowe Ransom, in a powerful essay in the *Literary Review*, said: "Probably the history of most of the abortive efforts at art is the history of wilful men who could not abandon their cause, but continued to worry it as a dog worries a bone, expecting to perform by fingers and rules what can come by magic only." Aye, indeed, gentles; it is like the lady on the tight-wire at the circus. Her beautiful performance looked so easy; and it *was* easy because she had carried her art bravely through to the point where she could *allow* it to be easy; in Ransom's phrase she had "abandoned the problem to mysterious powers within which are not the lean and laboured processes of self-conscious reason. If this abandonment is complete the oracle will speak."

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This difficult theory is valid not merely in realms of art, but in the quotidian traffic of life itself. Continually one faces the horrible matter of making decisions: whether to make a luncheon date, whether to get one's hair cut, read one of the innumerable manuscripts that publishers keep pestering one with, which letters to answer, etc., etc. The solution (we honestly believe) is, as far as possible, to avoid conscious rational decisions and choices: simply to do what you find yourself doing; to float in the great current of life with as little friction as possible; to allow things to settle themselves, as indeed they do with the most infallible certainty. In the great phrase that seemed fairly successful in the case of at least one empire, to muddle through. Is this mere casuistry? We don't think so. By "doing what you find yourself doing" we mean what you find your-

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self drifting into almost insensibly. There has been altogether too much bazoo about Will Power: the way to fool destiny is to keep your eyes averted from the things you really want; not to stare at them too fiercely; if you teach yourself painfully not to care about them you will find them (in the oddest way) beginning to pursue you. ↓

When we consider the sickness of the mind, the heats, chills, anguishes, errors, ecstasies, that lie behind the history of poetry, we could almost wish that no more great poems should ever be written. We dislike to consider that the human heart should require to be so fiercely moved. Oh, brave, brave souls (one cries out to the poets of the past) who have endured all this for my behalf!

But this suffering is different from the general supposition. The embryology of poetry is not analogous to

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that of animal life. The poet's torment is to know when his matter is ripe for attack. In the cloudy wrack of the mind are always any number of poems in suspension: the dear bewildering visions of his spirit. It is indeed a madness; that old, old saying that poetry is close to a mania is not mere humour. If any poet (even the humblest) permitted himself to be observed in the early frenzies of conception, indeed he would be taken for imbecile or epilept. He raises angry fists toward heaven, he groans and grunts, he is the most arrant medley of misery and glee. Self-esteem and self-hatred nudge him by turns. He drees his weird.

But, if he has once learned (in Mr. Ransom's wise phrase) "to *release* his theme to the processes of imagination" he can somewhat mitigate the duration of these noble horrors. The sweating and shaking must be under-

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gone, they are needful to encyst the pearly granule in the nourishing clot-
ted putty of the brain. But once there, he can only rely on instinct to tell him when to uproot the growing thing. Actual deposition, if he is lucky, will be not pain but rather ease and happiness.

It is ill to be too dogmatic in such matters. There are as many ways of writing a poem as there are of going to sleep. Some, by stiff process of will, are able to put themselves into the necessary trance-like state. Others, with strong coffee and uneasy ramblings of desperation, at last so weary the body that the mind clicks free and moves independent. But of every artist (all kinds) whose output was worthy the suffering it cost him, Thomas Fuller's grave words are true:

He gropeth after more light than he saw: he saw more than he durst speak of: he spake of more than he was thanked for.

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Ah, my poor pitiable! cries to us the voice of the poet from the page where his own troubles and ecstasies meet and blend with ours. *Ah, my poor pitiable, how can I help you? Is there naught but loneliness? Could not I suffer these pangs for you?* And we reply that he did, he has. Others he saved, himself he could not save. The only lasting treasure that mankind has is memories; and he has given us his own. Often, in one poem only, a great poet will give all his readers, through all subsequent ages, memories enough for a lifetime.

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XI. "At Home, Four to Six"

FOUR A. M. Often, after a breathless hot night, between three and four o'clock a wind begins to move. One wakes, and listens (my window opens toward a lonely strip of woods) to that quiet varying sound in the tree-tops, not unlike the rhythm of surf. The world at that time is one I can understand. my spirit is thoroughly at home in it. I may not know what *it* means; but I know what *I* mean. Later, in the golden blaze and bustle, I find myself a dozen different creatures at once. But then I am unified, federated, *e pluribus unum*. In the excellent formula of the little engraved pasteboards, I am "At Home, Four to Six."

“At Home, Four to Six”

Dawn-wind in tree-tops is a thrilling murmur and stir: it gives the feeling that something is going to happen; that feeling of half-blissful, half-terrified expectancy which is the summit of life. There is just such a sense stirring in literature to-day.

For what a spirit-sickness the world has been through, these recent years. What a long, sultry night. What simian chatterings, desperate gayeties, pathetic fads and pseudo-spiritual vaudeville. The peanut-shells of thought have been industriously nibbled, but the bandar-log have forgotten to chew the kernels; or else will eat them only in the form of peanut-butter. How many literary eccentricities and sensations, “devastating” books, new magazines founded (very fine, some of them), theological squabbles, Nie Wieder Kriegs, Business Builders, ectoplasms, lecture tours, censorship, Coués, Einsteins, Gurd-

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jieffs, Fourth Dimensions, Tutankhamens, symbolic dramas, Buy-a-Book-a-Week slogans, Lists of Ten Bests, prohibitions, inhibitions, exhibitions. I lump them all together, the fine and the farcical. Sheikings, shriekings, and seekings. And behind all the tattle, what a general and pitiable and honourable uneasiness it is evidence of.

Poetry, one may be proud to say, has remained comparatively sane. (The birds are beginning in the wood outside, in the hollow darkness. I say *hollow* because their liquid clatter comes with a clear, enlarged *reflected* sound, almost with an echo, as though they were under the roof of some great chapel.) Not untouched by the general frenzy and relaxation, yet the poets have served us nobly in the main: they have kept in touch with reality: in the new spirit of angry questioning they have retained what is fine, they have tried to scuff off the

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mere bombast. A little book like Squire's anthology, *Selections from Modern Poets*, shows plainly how honestly and beautifully they have fortified us. While bewildered statesmen were playing the goat, poets have had things to say. They have sat awake late at night, long after Pelmanists and Business Builders were snorting their fill.

That (now a pale lilac light comes sifting through open doors and windows) is perhaps the root of the matter. To take time to concentrate, to be still and intuitive long enough to see what is really interesting. Writing is never a labour, never a difficulty, if one can pause and cloister long enough to dull the dint of triviality and find out what one is really thinking. Is no one interested in *reality* (one sometimes wonders) that they're all so busy calling each other on the telephone?

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"Last night I read *A Shropshire Lad*," said a very courageously modern young woman. "I cried. What does that mean?" Well, it means that she is sane. It means that she understands the basis of literature, which is feeling, perception. I myself, after living several years in a constant stew and writing quite a number of eager words in an effort to discern what literature really means, what is the impulse and actuality behind it, humbly believe myself also beginning to comprehend. Perhaps I am reaching the point where I can begin. (Now the light is a clear, lucid pearly-greenness, like that seen by a swimmer under water.)

An observant art critic, a visitor to this country, was saying the other day that she found American landscape insignificant (in the exact sense). It seemed to her to have nothing to testify. It seemed shallow, barren,

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bright but not translucent. (Joseph Conrad, by the way, made somewhat the same comment.) To which I replied that the continent was too large: there was only a certain amount of landscape to go round and they had to spread it very thin to cover the area. Europeans, though often too polite to admit it, are usually struck by a kind of spiritual meagreness in the American scene. Muirhead Bone said that he had to hunt a long time before he found a bit of landscape that gave him “the Edgar Allan Poe feeling.”

Perhaps this is natural; perhaps also it is partly due to European preconceptions. It needs centuries and centuries of human imagination to instil meaning and sensibility into a landscape. That is one reason why living on the northern coast of Long Island is happy: the country has an air of age and human association. One of

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the tasks of the poet is to help Nature acquire a meaning. That is one of the reasons for the fascination of the physically actual in literature. It is always satisfying to read about a definite *place*—a house, a street, a village—when you know it really exists. Things sometimes do not seem to have any spiritual existence until they have been written about. I myself, because they mean so much to me, jabber about Vesey Street, St. Paul's Churchyard, the Lightning Statue, the great pillars inside the Telephone and Telegraph Building, the old courtyard on Ann Street, a hundred other minutiae of that region, because I yearn to help them along toward that splendid significance they desire. I should like to people Long Island with poets, so that people would ride on the Oyster Bay trains caring nothing for soot, crowding, and delay, filled with pride and excitement

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merely to see the station-names on the platforms. Those names should come to them with thrills of recognition, because poetry had mentioned them. Names that have been even only casually honoured in literature acquire meaning and wealth of association. Dean Prior, Bemerton, Concord, Salem, Walden, Windermere, Oulton, Stoke Poges, Box Hill—one can make up the list for himself. “Is this the *real* Walden?” one says to himself, seeing the name on a sign-board. He means, is it the Walden that Thoreau wrote about. There may be other Waldens (in fact, there are), but they are plainly spurious in any artistic sense. The habit (often mocked, and indeed often truly risible) that English minor poets have of tagging at the foot of each poem the name of the place where it was written, is due to an excellent instinct. The poet yearns to put *pied-à-terre*:

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to strengthen himself by contact and ligature with the fertile actual earth.

(The light outside—it is approaching 6 o'clock—is now a clear flat white, without a spark of gold. A hazy day, perhaps?)

Poems are, in a sense, the *eyes* of our Muse. One looks into them, sees their wistful loveliness, sees them darkened with sudden moods of sadness, and wonders what they are thinking of, what they would convey. Then one thinks of the pitifully scanty proportion of thought that gets expressed, even put down in roughly communicable form. O miserable ratio of the transmissions to the unuttered and only half-apprehended broodings! This is so of everyone. Consider, then, that huge world of undivulged thought, that great sea of inward fancy, exultation, yearning, in which conscious and communicated life is a mere sprinkle of atolls. This

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vastness of individual and solitary thinkings is the sky under which literature moves and from which it draws light and colour; it is the earth that nourishes the artist's dream; it is the sea along whose bending and alluring coasts we build our villages and light-houses.

(It is 6 o'clock. I hear the Chinaman's alarm clock buzz up in the attic. Out on the lawn large robins are watchfully hopping and skimming. They pause, with absurdly indignant and suspicious air, to see me candidate on the porch in pyjamas. Behind the willow trees a flagrant orange spark burns through the leaves. Time begins again.)

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*“That One Might Almost
Say . . .”*

A GREAT novelist, one of the greatest of our time (this, by the way, is a true story), was once visited by a friendly fellow who was of a bookish sort but not in any professional sense a “man of letters.” The novelist and his visitor went for a walk together in the country; they talked about this and that. The visitor, perhaps a little constrained by his affectionate admiration for the author, was secretly troubled by a sense of imperfect *rapport*. Their minds did not seem to meet exactly, but slithered past each other and had to be recalled. Was this going to be (the visitor wondered) like so many other keenly anticipated Moments,

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a painful disappointment when actually experienced? Was this one of those desperately grievous passages of human maladjustment when the mind perceives a situation of grotesque absurdity which must be conducted (with decent politeness) to the nearest exit?

Then happened an astonishing thing. As they returned from their ramble, the novelist looked sharply at his anxious guest, and said: "I see that you and I are sympathetic. I see that you divine, better perhaps than any one I have known, what I have tried to do in my work. I see that you understand me very deeply. You have penetrated my secret. If there should be any necessity of any one writing about me, I wish *you* might be the one to do it."

The visitor, not himself a trained journalist or critic, was tripartially touched, pleased, and alarmed. As,

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in succeeding years, his friendly intimacy with the novelist grew and flourished, the latter often alluded to the happy private understanding between them. But occasionally, in his heart, the other permitted himself to wonder just what it was that he was supposed to have understood.

* * * *

Now this little anecdote strikes me as a relishable parable upon literature. Life itself, or Nature, or whatever you choose, to call this universal frame, seems to have a passionate yearning to be understood. With what broad gestures of invitation, and also with what subtle almost imperceptible hints and suggestions and pollicitations, she lays herself out to cajole us, to notify her eagerness. Like Mistress Elizabeth Drury, whose

Pure and eloquent blood
Spoke in her cheeks, and so distinctly wrought,
That one might almost say, her body thought—

"That One Might Almost Say"

Nature's whole complexion is one of entrancing appeal. And so, even though we only catch her sense at two removes, we all, scientists, philosophers, theologians, painters, poets, according to the measure of our individual hardihood, pursue her in our own ways. How many, many enigmatic nudges she gives us: how slow we are to follow them up. How many thunderstorms circled the globe in gold and purple before man saw what she was driving at—offering us the subway, the telephone, the radio! What was it Walt Whitman said?—"I find letters from God dropt in the street."

Let us say then (even if only for the sake of argument: which is the greatest of intellectual sakes) that Nature pines to be understood. One of her errors of judgment, perhaps, was to have terrified her urchin too thoroughly. She gave primitive man a

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pretty bad scare: only now, after all these thousand generations, we begin to outgrow those inherited quavers. To the poet she speaks with a specially winning voice. She persuades him that he, he particularly, understands her. Of course this may be just another of her cunning stratagems. But even if all her lovelinesses are tricks, at least that implies a Trickster? She turns on the poet her clear grave regard, and says that in him, at last, she has found a kinsprit. He, he indeed (so he believes he hears her murmur!), has grasped her mystery. And if any one is to write about her, he is the one.

Sometimes I think she did that once too often. She said it to Walt Whitman, and he took her at her word. In Walt, fragments of truth escaped that perhaps she had hardly intended to get out. Poets are dangerous people to intrust with secrets.

"That One Might Almost Say"

But perhaps that is just why Nature tells them so many.

(And yet the whole gist of Walt Whitman had escaped at least once before; at a time when the Pandora's hope-chest of literature flew wide open and so much got out. I mean, of course, in the seventeenth century. There is a line of Ben Jonson's, in his poem to the Lady Venetia Digby, that is a seed from which whole acres of Leaves of Grass might well spring—

What makes these tiffany, silkes, and lawne,
Embroideries, feathers, fringes, lace,
When every limbe takes like a face!

I italicize the line for the meditation of Whitmanians.

Of course the difference between Ben and Walt—the two greatest poets, I suppose, who are always spoken of by their first names—was that what was to the Elizabethan only a witty conceit, was by Walt

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taken quite seriously. Where the Elizabethan was content to put up a charmingly lettered finger-post—saying perhaps COVENTRY, 10 Miles—the modern poet insists on walking the whole way, to be sure whether the town is really there.

(But all this is only a parenthesis; the idea struck me as so enchanting I couldn't wait to put it down.)

So the poet, in his moments of private excitement, has this inward assure that he and Truth are in secret sympathy. This does not necessarily mean happiness. Men must be pathetic before they can be sympathetic.

* * * *

I wonder, incidentally, whether you have really dug into Walt's *Song of Myself*. I wonder whether *I* have? "The dirt receding before my prophetic screams." . . . "I am given up by traitors, I talk wildly,

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I have lost my wits, I and nobody else am the greatest traitor". . . .

"I am stucco'd with quadrupeds and birds all over". . . . "he that by me spreads a wider breast than my own proves the width of my own". . . .

"Shoulder your duds, dear son, and I will mine, and let us hasten forth"

. . . . "My words itch at your ears till you understand them."

What an evening William Blake would have had with *Leaves of Grass*.

Has the absolute essence of Walt's achievement been stated? He abolished loneliness. No one need ever be lonely again if he is capable of reading Whitman. If he is not capable, then he hasn't done enough thinking to be in danger of solitude. That, after all, is one of the honours of the poet: to reduce the sum total of loneliness. Keats said in one of his letters: "I never quite despair, and I read Shakespeare."

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Walt's obeisance to science (e. g., section 23 of *Song of Myself*) was usually a trifle humorous; but it was genuine. Walt was shrewd enough to perceive that poetry is really an extension or excurrency of the scientific spirit. Science is an attempt to do the possible and to push out the frontiers of the fact; poetry is an attempt to do the impossible, and also an attempt so graceful that it will almost appear to have been done. But it is an attempt conducted in the honourable spirit of mathematics or chemistry. Poetry seeks to apply the utmost rigour of accuracy and apprehension to matters which are, of their nature, immeasurable, evanescent, impalpable. The poet passes the small sieve of his mind through an opaque fog: a fog which at its most luminous is not more than pearly: and in that mesh adhere bright-shining drops and globules. This is as close as he can ever come to

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examining the nature of that fog, bead by clear bead. So where the poet is distinctly inferior to the scientist is in the (probably irrelevant) matter of good cheer. The scientist is happy, I dare say, because he does sometimes succeed: he discovers some formula absolutely valid in itself; composes some machine that he can see working. Like the verbs *utor*, *fruor*, *fungor*, *potior*, and *vescor* (if I remember the Latin grammar) he governs the ablative: he is effective in expressing agency, instrumentality, achievement. But the poet never succeeds. I myself, staying indoors on a fine Sunday morning to write this piece, am far from happy, punctuated by sudden pangs lest these shades and divisions of scrutiny are not, after all, either useful or worth attempt.

Poe said that there is no such thing as a long poem. I would go further and fare worse: there is not even such a

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thing as a finished poem, complete in itself. I tried to intimate this once by calling a piece of three stanzas "A Poem in Four Stanzas"; my idea being that the reader should supply the fourth in his own mind, applying the meditation to himself. And lo, how I was belaboured with letters (and even telegrams of exult) for my supposed carelessness. But art is communication: it requires not merely a sender but also a recipient. A poem is a marriage service, prescriptive for the imagined union of a mind and a mood. It is never complete until it is performed in the spirit of some destined reader—for whom, indeed, it may wait long at the altar. This intimate complication of poem and reader is not sufficiently understood. When the two really mate, they grow side by side. For instance, Whitman's *Song of Myself*, once seminated in the mind, grows there continually. Whenever

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you return to it, you discover something new: both you and it, in your mutual relation, are more capacious than when you last encountered. Poetry deals with essences that are perpetually in motion: at the very start the poet verifies that dream of mediæval science. The mind is the true *primum mobile*. And the poet, at his best, deals not in materials available for mere pleasure or contentment. His transaction is in those pains and yearnings which, when understandingly shared, are more thrilling than happiness.

* * * *

Melville truly said that all beautiful things are touched with melancholy; and perhaps the preceding sounds a little gloomy. It need not be so construed. I have said that poetry is a subdivision of the sense of humour; by which I mean it is an exercise of those same faculties of

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observation, comparison, analogy, surprising and confounding association, which are the meat of laughter. The unknown genius who first called brickbats "Irish confetti" was a poet of high creative energy. Indeed the eccentric antics of a poet in his heat of composition might well be mistaken for the rehearsings of a clown. The greater the poet, the more likely is some stroke of mirth or even ribaldry to come flashing in. Bernard Shaw, and many others, too, have pointed to the terrific voltage of Shakespeare's comic spirit: bursting out (amid the agonizing Dark Lady sequence, the real World's Series) with such wretched punning as sonnet 135; such bath-house humour as sonnet 130; such gruesome carnal mockery as sonnet 151; "Is it not clear," Shaw says in the preface to his own *Dark Lady of the Sonnets*, "that to the last there was in Shakespeare an incorrigible

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divine levity, an inexhaustible joy that derided sorrow?” Shaw having often told us that if he had been born in 1556 instead of 1856 he would have given Shakespeare “a harder run for his money than all the other Elizabethans put together,” we may accept his word as authoritative. (Although Shakespeare did not find it necessary to write prefaces longer than the plays themselves to explain what they were about.)

If you care to examine a similar alternation of mood in a contemporary Elizabethan, consider another sonnet series that one naturally brackets by colour scheme with Shakespeare’s to Black Beauty. Don Marquis’s *Sonnets to a Red-Haired Lady* contain the kind of japes that archangels whisper to one another under the covert of an uplifted opaline wing, lest any of the new-arriving blest should overhear. But then give particular heed

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to the last four pieces, where, after so many celestial vulgarities, the poet rises suddenly into grave beauty and sobriety.

“Poetry,” said Shelley, “lifts the veil from the hidden beauty of the world, and makes familiar objects be as if they were not familiar.” This, if you substitute ‘absurdity’ for ‘beauty,’ is also a good definition of humour. Mr. Chaplin has made the most familiar objects in the world—elderly shoes and trousers—something exceedingly rich and strange. Humour is perhaps a sense of intellectual perspective: an awareness that some things are really important, others not; and that the two kinds are most oddly jumbled in every-day affairs. It is just this same sense of affectionate (or indignant) amazement which is the beginning of poetry. Every human spirit is condemned, a great part of the time, to solitary confine-

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ment; but it is confined in a kind of telephone cell where communication is possible with others far away, in time or space. And in this imprisonment and stress, the spirit of protesting laughter rises as naturally as the steam that gathers on the window of a telephone booth where a warm-blooded creature is struggling to get a long-distance connection.

* * * *

You rise early in the morning and go outdoors to make a before-breakfast circuit of the house and snuff the garden air ingrained with gold. But though you think yourself taking the day by the prime, it is already old to the birds. Their airy brawling, reduplicated chirrup and tweetling, their almost crazy jargoneering, has been going on for hours. So it is in the tree-tops of the mind. However delicious to yourself these musings about poetry, all has been said before.

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This, then, is perhaps the sovereign tribute to poetry, that though you may have read all the argument from Sir Philip Sidney down to Santayana and Sandburg, yet you are still driven to formulate your happiness for yourself. This is not easy. Like John Donne at his prayers,

Sometimes I finde that I had forgot what I was about, but when I began to forget it, I cannot tell. A memory of yesterdays pleasures, a feare of to morrows dangers, a straw under my knee, a noise in mine eare, a light in mine eye, on any thing, a nothing, a fancy, a chimera in my braine, troubles me in my prayer.

The sense of poetry is closely akin to that absent-mindedness. Poetry might almost be defined as what you are really thinking about when you believe yourself to be thinking of something else. It is a wash of quicksilver at the back of the mind, which

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turns that window into a mirror. The modern interest in the so-called psychology of the unconscious is nothing new to the poet. He knows, as Shakespeare and Wordsworth did, that the mystery of his traffic is a sleep and a forgetting. There is little in the way of symbolism, oneiromancy, or subliminal psyches that was not pretty bluffly hinted at in the old Border Ballads, where simple art deals so cuttingly with essential emotions and terrors. Sleep is surely more important than we dared admit: else why would the every-morning struggle to wake, to climb back up the sliddery glacier-notches of consciousness, be so agonizing?

It was a sleep
So dark and so bewilderingly deep
That only death's were deeper or completer,
And none when I awoke stranger or sweeter.
Awake, the strangeness still hung over me
As I with far-strayed senses stared at the light.

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Strange—yet stranger I.
And as one climbs from water up to land
Fumbling for weedy steps whereon to climb
To this remote and new-struck isle of time.
(JOHN FREEMAN, "Waking.")

* * * *

The poet is not to be condemned,
rather pitied, for his furious egotism.

Cries the poet every day:
Ego, mei, mihi, me!

But this burning expansion of the First Person Singular is, in his passion, somehow universalized and purged. It is "to airy thinness beat." Still, "Me is a touchy creature, chained near I." That being so, it is not surprising that the poet can do little with his fiery matter until it has cooled to bearable touch. "Emotion recollected in tranquillity" is the classic phrase. The poet's attitude toward his emotions is not unlike that of a parent to young children. He rarely sentimentalizes them until they are

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safely and silently abed. On foot and alert, they are too wildly, maddeningly active.

So the poet feels his material all about him. He floats in consciousness, a naked swimmer completely and lucidly embraced in that perilous buoyancy. And even from that level immersion he can see blue coast-line, as a bather at Cold Spring Harbour sees Connecticut across Long Island Sound. Poetry is to the mind what Connecticut is to Long Islanders. We know it is there, even though we rarely attain it.

But the poet is not only aware of his material: he has the most curious feeling that it has already been selected for him. Whether by his trained instinct, or his subconscious mind, or by lonely Nature in her coming-on disposition, it seems to have been edited for his golden moment and passion. Life lies before

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him strangely like an anthology; and the double charm of a good anthology is that it not merely offers us beautiful verse; it also, by its arrangement and inclusions, gives a precious inlook upon the mind of the compiler. Then let us terminate meditations which can never be concluded by merely hinting that poetry and religion are the same. It astonishes me to reflect that Shelley was considered an "atheist." For even though our philosophy may not have passed beyond the patacake stage, poets remember that both Jesus and Pegasus were born in a stable.

The Arch of Nothingness

XIII. The Arch of Nothingness

I MET the Devil last night. It was exactly three minutes past midnight. He said: "After all, what does it matter whether you write it or not? Why not go to bed?"

* * * *

It requires more hardihood to tell the truth in prose than in poetry. A certain extravagance is conceded to poets: surprising sentiments are condoned (or ignored) when expressed in good verse. For this reason many are content to utter their indignations in rhyme; which gives them the relief of expression without the embarrassment of being apprehended.

* * * *

Too large a proportion of literary criticism is written by people who are

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deliciously naïf and solemn, who have seen little of life as it is actually transacted and have insufficiently pondered what they have seen. Their ears have been so deafened by the clamour of print that they have forgotten to listen to the beating of their own hearts. Many agreeable and influential book reviewers seem almost unaware how human beings really behave. Someone should borrow money from them, send a resolute insurance agent to visit them, or in some other lively fashion acquaint them with the seamy side of life.

* * * *

Praise is pleasant: if only it didn't make one so humble; hostility is painful: if only it didn't make one so proud.

* * * *

There is much great writing being done; there would be still more if we were not (most of us) so eager to be

The Arch of Nothingness

safely and mannerly mediocre, which is a difficult, austere ambition. It requires inordinate valour and recklessness to do the easiest thing: to set down the untinctured matter of the heart. What men really think goes mostly into letters and privy journals; and they console themselves for indiscretion by thinking that at any rate it won't be published (if at all) until they themselves are out of print. They prefer not to spill the beans; only the has-beens. Yet, if one could write every line as though for posthumous issue only, what fun, what fun! And if one did, it would become posthumous much sooner.

* * * *

For it is literature of the secret sort—letters, diaries, notebooks—that is the most fascinating: those private testaments where you catch human beings off guard and speaking without fear of being understood. I need

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only mention Butler's *Notebooks*; or the odd little *Notebook of Anton Chekhov*. This latter caused me to meditate that perhaps this whole world as we know it is merely the notebook of some Demiurge: each of us is a jotted memorandum of some story or character the Gifted Author intended (perhaps still intends?) some day to work out. And that is the cause of all human restlessness: we are hunting about hungrily for the rest of the story in which we belong.

* * * *

We had spoken stammeringly, it is true; and yet wisely, understandingly, hopefully; we had escaped clean across the frontier of Time. Then I felt a change: looking at you, I saw your eye had chanced upon the clock. You began to speak automatic politenesses, suavities without meaning. We were back in Time.

* * * *

The Arch of Nothingness

I have not discharged my payments
to Eternity; but, in that odd phrase
that I have never quite understood,
I have an "equity" in it.

* * * *

Your face is pleasantly familiar;
but I can't quite seem to remember
your name. . . .

My name, he replied, is Death.

* * * *

Literature is of several kinds.
Sometimes it is intended to amuse, to
inform, to distract, to reprove; but
occasionally it attempts also to convey
that strange solitude and homesick-
ness that is the glory and distress
of the human spirit.

* * * *

Every human being is painfully
aware of his own paradoxes, his piti-
ful shortcomings. Consequently, with
those who also know these details too
well he is shy about uncovering his

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soul. This is why the smoking car is Babbitt's confessional.

* * * *

Poetry must be lived before it can either be written or properly understood. And that is why the enjoyment of poetry is essentially a feeling of recognition: the recognition of something you thought you had forgotten, or were hardly aware that you had once noticed.

* * * *

I opened a door in my mind, and in an unexpected polygon of mirrors I saw a dozen reduplicated selves, all, though different, mocking cartoons of me. With shouts of incredulous laughter they greeted one another.

* * * *

I suffer fools gladly; for I have always been on good terms with myself.

* * * *

The highbrow critic wrote a darkly eloquent and gloomy piece about

The Arch of Nothingness

destiny, truth, and fidelity to literary art. Then he went out to lunch. Sitting at the next table, I heard him yelping with laughter.

* * * *

I, who offend a hundred times a week, sometimes worry whether those against whom I trespass will ever condone my errors. Then I am comforted, remembering that even I have also forgiven much.

* * * *

But should I call a caucus of my different selves, who would serve as chairman?

* * * *

If the world knows your address, you are doomed.

* * * *

Resign yourself to this: that your purest intentions and attempts, your most honourable strugglings toward virtue and honour, will be annotated

INWARD HO!

against you as indisputable evidence of your baseness and perversity.

* * * *

There was a child four years old who went to the hospital to have her adenoids and tonsils out. And, waiting in the little chamber outside the operating room, gradually the strangeness of the scene, the white gowns, the smell of drugs, the hissing of some medical engine beyond the door, crept upon her nerves. She was frightened, and clung to the one she knew best. Then came a large, cheerful doctor with brawny bare arms, to give the anæsthetic. "Hullo, Tommy!" he said, with calculated shrewdness. "I'm not Tommy!" she cried, all her furious feminine soul rising to the insult. And her protest against this outrage so occupied her mind that it kept her thoughts busy right down to the sill of oblivion.

There is a parable here. Give us

The Arch of Nothingness

some grievance, some burning obsession, some excellent indignation, to keep us happily busy under the very arch of nothingness.

* * * *

When people die, I suppose someone has to go through their pockets, to straighten things out. I was just thinking, suppose my mind died this afternoon, and some gravely friendly person went through it, what would he find in its pockets? A lot of little familiar shining trinkets, I dare say, that I had forgotten were there, or had grown so used to I never looked at them. Oh, yes, and some quite new bright oddities also. And a few favourite and well-rubbed puns that I had relished.

Let's see if I can guess what he would find in those pockets. Well, perhaps the shimmer of some rainy streets at night; the falling toll of the Metropolitan chimes eddying down

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over Gramercy Park on a spring morning; the roaring croon of a steam calliope; Oxford bells heard through the dark; a golden figure of Lightning seen, on gusty winter days, through a speckled window-pane; the white figures of cricketers on a green scutum of Pennsylvania turf; a round-towered castle on a hilltop in Germany, where (at the age of seven) I first tasted beer—and hated it; sunset light dustily slanting through the alcoves of a college library; the “silver shock” of water when you dive naked into it; a sand-spit on Lake Champlain under a steep bluff crowned with grieving pines. . . . But why catalogue? The list is too long, and the intellectual coroner would grow impatient. Here, he would cry, open the window and let’s get rid of this junk.

Prepare to Meet with Caliban

XIV. Prepare to Meet with Caliban

EVERY vigilant observer knows (in his own life or his friends') confessions of comedy, outrages of tragedy, refinements of surprise, which exceed anything literature has dared to portray. Perhaps the rich utility of the art is to remind us of what we have already learned or surmised. Literature, said a charming editorial in the *London Times* not long ago, is "complete statement." The beneficence of great writers is that they seize our pitiable little groping thoughts and visions, amplify and complete them; and from the vantage of their fiercer, fuller, more humane purview of life they satisfy us by in-

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telligibly expressing what we had just begun to suspect. We were learning to add; and, in a burst of delight, they showed us how to multiply.

* * * *

Literature, then, completes and dignifies our emotional life; but it is only a commentary: it is not life itself. Wordsworth's famous line about books being "a substantial world" sounds rather dubious. No matter how stoutly you pretend, literature proves but a pale consoler in times of hunger and stress. It is as lovely as moonlight, but it is outdoors the little dark dwelling of the mind, where the spirit feels its way cannily, like a man in his own house at night. "I comfort myself with words," says the mind: and contemplates the symbols it deems apt. *Calmness, Courage, Friendship, Peace*—such words, in clean italic letters, it sets down for sedatives: and is grieved to find them

Prepare to Meet with Caliban

no medicine at all. "Courage is a noble word," says the lonely heart to herself—"But where is his hand that once lay on my breast?" Ah! poor realist, such are matters that require counsellors more slow and sure of tread. What a wise instinct it was to call Time "Father." He is indeed paternal: this is He that shall tuck us all in bed at last, and there most restless urchins find their endless peace.

* * * *

For words (said some wise one), though the coins of literature, are only the counters of science: or, as we may revise, only the counters of Life. And when Life hunts men hard, literature makes a moonlight flitting. "Argue it not," cries Heart: "this happened to none other, nor did I read it in a book. This is different. It happened to Me! And the precedents, even if there were any, do not apply."

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There are no precedents: You are the first You that ever was.

* * * *

Yet those who have lived a number of years in level country grow hungry for mountains. Imagine one who had spent his whole career on a flat plain and had never lifted his eyes toward hills; or ears that had heard only the tinsmith clatter of dance-hall music, never the deep voice of an organ trembling the whole cave of air. Such is the case of the infinitely large majority who have lived without any conception of the meaning and service of literature: whose only fodder is the current fiction and magazines and newspapers. These so enormously outnumber the few whose instinct leads them back to the nourishment of great books that it would be pitiable snobbery to pretend that the bibliophiles alone have discovered some lovely mystery and happiness

Prepare to Meet with Caliban

occult from simpler men. The truth is that every lucky soul has discovered a secret none other is likely to guess. This secret is himself. If he knows what makes him happy, whether gardening or radio tinkering or betting on horses, then he is an artist and must be let alone. To be unhappy is shabby enough; but there is a misdemeanour more vulgar still: to insist upon other people being happy in my way.

* * * *

Nothing, therefore, is more diverting to the mind than the cliques and jealousies and waves of fashion among poets and critics. These small turmoils are not only amusing to contemplate; they should be deliberately stirred up now and again in the interest of the Comic Spirit and to prevent readers from taking the literary tribe too seriously. For these trifles, if taken with a grain of Epsom salts, are excellently hilarious, laxative to

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the spirit, and flush the system for a reapplication to affairs that really matter. The debility of literary historians has always been that they denatured the writers they dealt with and made them less real than marble. It is sorry enough to be the victim of a legend and an epitaph during life; but at any rate while a man lives he has some chance to show himself arterial. Once dead he can be misemphasized *ad lib.* Shakespeare's diary, had he kept one, would probably have topsy-turved the whole world of letters. A mind too proud to unbend over the small *ridiculosa* of life is as painful as a library with no trash in it. There must always be a shelf of detective stories and desert-insular romances for after-supper dissolution.

* * * *

But it is a sound instinct not to impart the truth to those who will take

Prepare to Meet with Caliban

it too hard. Life must often be read not as straightaway text, but as an acrostic.

* . * * *

Speaking of desert islands: John Masefield, in his charming but dogmatic little book on Shakespeare, rather mocks the idea that *The Tempest* is an allegory. But why not? Maugre J. M., we have still a taste for imagining the island with its thousand twangling instruments, its insubstantial pageant, its midnight mushrooms, a pretty gloss of the poet's own mind. Every mind has its own Ariel, its own Caliban; and though Caliban is generally thought of as the poor brutish natural, in terror of his master's voice and store of pinches, yet this is not all. There is one line—

We must prepare to meet with Caliban—that seems by context and in the gravity of its utterance to show that the crisis was not easy. Also the

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sad little epilogue—"My ending is despair"—which we are told to accept as Shakespeare's last public word, enforces the final truth: that all art, however great, is vain unless it meets hearts that understand it. Every artist must "prepare to meet with Caliban"; lucky if he has so diligent an Ariel.

Yes: *The Tempest* seems to remain as a wistful fable of the artist's internecine selves. One feels all the more certain that Prospero stands attorney for the whole world of writers: for having hit upon a phrase that tickled him, he made haste to use it again (The "deeper than e'er plummet sounded" line). Who originated the quaintly misleading saying "Shakespeare never repeats"? And certainly he, more than any other man, was the cause of repetition in others.

The most curious oddity about *The*

Prepare to Meet with Caliban

Tempest was one which Mr. Masefield, as a seaman, might well have remarked: the lamentable fact that throughout the marine disaster and reconditioning the master of the vessel has practically nothing to say. Yet the skipper was a spirited fellow, for he "capered" with pleasure when his ship was magically repaired. But it is the gallows-faced bosun who gives tongue. Bosuns have usually been great talkers; though not when the captain is by. Still, we are told that this bosun was born to be hanged.

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XV. Sudation Frustrated; and Stella's Image Omitted

A CRITIC is one who deals with crises. The crises he knows most about are those of his own spirit. He will be most valuable to us if he begins by giving a synopsis of himself. "One becomes typical by being to the utmost degree one's self." This I find in the preface to Havelock Ellis's enthralling book *The Dance of Life*.

So I resolve that in the general babble about literature, I will try to hang onto that simple meaning of the word *critic*. It is queer how words keep attempting to slip out of their senses. A hermit is someone who lives in a desert. If there is one place in the world that is undeserted, it is

Sudation Frustrated

Times Square (which isn't even a square, by the way); and just on the edge of that area is a café calling itself a *Hermitage*. The paradox is so agreeable that I really must go there for lunch.

* * * *

Ah, how happy if one could feel certain of putting into effect that great doctrine that living itself should be an art. (See Havelock Ellis's chapter on "The Art of Morals.") But life seems an awkwardly inductile medium. It isn't homogeneous: now it runs thin and meagre, now it clots and strings. Too much turps, too much turpitude. The painful contradictions of the old Greek epitaph are ever-present in the artist's mind, they numb his fingers—

*I, who loved Beauty, was not beautiful:
I cherished Truth and yet I was not
true;*

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I, who remembered, am so soon forgotten—

But I loved you.

I, who praised Mirth, was well acquainted with sorrow;

I honoured Freedom, yet I was not free;

But once indeed I knew the just equation—

For you loved me.

So we ask of the critic that he prepare himself to deal judiciously not merely with the mimetic and factitious crises of literature but with the actual crises of life (as Havelock Ellis does in that remarkable book.) The very word *crises* has, to all eyes and ears, a vital colour and sound. That is not surprising, as we use it chiefly in referring to politics and disease.

* * * *

Sudation Frustrated

For literature, in some moods, is a very hollow voice. What is the virtue and service of a book? Only to help me to a more genuine realization of myself, to live less gingerly and shabbily. If it has done that, away with it; I have no wish to see it again. Sometimes, late at night, I see the damned things stacked up in tormenting rows, mere bricks of paper, and say I'd throw them all into the furnace gladly for the kingdom and power and glory of pouring out my own heart. They are only useful as a consolation for that stark dumbness and terror that comes upon one phiz-a-phiz with life itself.

* * * *

So the greatest treachery the critic can commit is that of acting the poor pitiable pontiff: of feigning certainty. For all our fine words, we are (every now and then) lonely, frightened children: it is very dark under the

INWARD HO!

trees. Even immortality (whatever that may mean) is a negative word: a word of terror. All crave, indeed, to make their living show the quality of art: but we have only one sketch block, and the charcoal is bad to erase. A wise and decent shame withholds us from too mercilessly admitting our secret shinings: we fear that these moments of pure feeling can best be experienced alone. Others, very likely, prefer to pursue them their own way. Some very meaning secret, perhaps, resides in this horrid bliss of solitude. Truth, which some like to call by an even auguster name, admits callers one by one. "When I met God," said the Oriental mystic, "it was just like being alone."

It is in such matters as these that we come to the critics for aid and comfort. Their pronouncements had been so assured, we thought perhaps . . .

Sudation Frustrated

But they were critics of literature,
not of life.

* * * *

Yet man has much the best of it, indeed, far more fun than mountains and mice. What innocent pleasure in setting down his ponders in black serpentines of ink; then inventing types, to give himself the excitement of rereading them. Once in a while, too, he does shoot an arrow a long way. A little Syracusan coin with its winged horse and wheatsheaf and sickle, now stamped again every week (some fistful of centuries later) as the emblem of the *Literary Review*—indeed an obol in the hand of Charon, one might say, if not fearing to be misconceived by the most amiable of editors. Superior to the animals in his divine capacity for self-torment, man is at least their equal in wise and happy moments of tranquillity: when the fury of his conflicting desires is

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mercifully stilled, when he contemplates the rich world in delighted curiosity. He can think of a wind-jammer at sea in moonlight, living and white as a dogwood tree. He can hear that bending creak and sway, and even thank his stars he is not there himself to be stricken by such painful completeness of beauty. Such loveliness, he says to himself, could not be borne . . . and yet it must be. That is the critic's duty perhaps: to bear the full impact of beauty and make it tolerable for the rest of us. . . . Isn't it a bit odd, sometimes, how little of that beauty he seems to think we can stand?

* * * *

With my hand on the doorknob, it occurs to me that if there had been a frontispiece in this little book, I should like it to have been Dürer's engraving of Saint Jerome in his study. How delightful it is! The

Sudation Frustrated

bald-headed old anchorite deep in scrivening; the equally bald (but unhaloed) skull on the window-ledge; the table bare save for crucifix and inkpot (but why is the ink on the *left* side, where, to dip the quill, the Saint's long trailing sleeve must smear over the wet manuscript?); the cushions (rather a lot of cushions for a solitary ascete); the scissors and memoranda tucked into loops on the wall; and, of course, the sleeping dog and lion in the foreground.

It means, I suppose, that immersion in studies puts to slumber the dog of Meanness and the lion of Passion. You'll notice, however, that the lion is not so sound asleep as the dog.

* * * *

And then, perhaps, there falls (as on Saint Jerome's blinking lion) a sudden weariness, final as death itself. Something yields and swoons

INWARD HO!

in the mind. All these dear niceties are blanked in mist, recede to their proper insignificance.

Come, Sleep; O Sleep! The certain knot of
peace,
The bating-place of wit. . . .
Thou shalt in me,
Livelier than elsewhere, Stella's image see.

But while you're about it, Sleep, we differ from Sir Philip in this: to-night we can even get along without Stella's image. We've chosen our epitaph for the evening—what the students at Leyden write on the walls of the examination-room when they suspect they've flunked—*Hic Suvadavit, Sed Frustra!*

Appendix

Appendix

[Being a brief and rigorous anthology of comments on kindred matters. I have asked the publisher to include several blank pages after these, so that you may fill in favourite excerpts from your own reading.]

The work is done, and from the fingers fall
The bloodwarm tools that brought the labour
thro:

The tasking eye that overrunneth all
Rests, and affirms there is no more to do.
Now the third joy of making, the sweet flower
Of blessed work, blooming in godlike spirit;
Which whoso plucketh holdeth for an hour
The shrivelling vanity of mortal merit.

And thou, my perfect work, thou'rt of to-day;
To-morrow a poor and alien thing wilt be,
True only should the swift life stand at stay:
Therefore farewell, nor look to bide with me.

APPENDIX

Go find thy friends, if there be one to love thee:
Casting thee forth, my child, I rise above thee.

—Robert Bridges (*The Growth of Love*).

* * * *

“Well, Francis,” we said to himself, sitting in a back room in Fulton Street, “do you ever write any prose?”

“Oh, no,” he said; “poetry is what comes to you, but in prose you’ve got to know what you’re doing.”

—Interview with Francis Carlin.

* * * *

Poetry is the voice of the solitary man. The poet is always a solitary; and yet he speaks to others—he would win their attention. Thus it follows that every poem is a social act done by a solitary man. And being an alien from the strange land of the solitary, he cannot be expected to admonish or to sermonize, or uplift, as it is called; and so take part in the cabals and intrigues in other lands of which he knows nothing, being himself a stranger from a strange land, the land of the solitary. People listen to him as they would to any other traveler come from distant countries and all he asks for is courtesy even as he himself is courteous.

Inferior poets are those who forget their dignity—and, indeed, their only chance of

Appendix

being permitted to live—and to make friends try to enter into the lives of the people whom they would propitiate, and so become teachers and moralists and preachers. And soon for penalty of their rashness and folly they forget their own land of the solitary, and its speech perishes from their lips. The traveller's tales are of all the most precious, because he comes from a land—the poet's solitude—which no other feet have trodden and which no other feet will tread.

—J. B. Yeats.

* * * *

The simple imaginative mind may have its rewards in the repetition of its own silent working coming continually on the spirit with a fine suddenness.

—Keats, letter to Bailey.

* * * *

Poetry should strike the reader as a wording of his own highest thoughts, and appear almost a remembrance.

—Keats, letter to John Taylor.

* * * *

We read fine things, but never feel them to the full until we have gone the same steps as the author.

—Keats, letter to Reynolds.

* * * *

APPENDIX

Poetry must work out its own salvation in a man: It cannot be matured by law and precept, but by sensation and watchfulness . . . In *Endymion*, I leaped headlong into the sea, and thereby have become better acquainted with the soundings, the quick-sands, and the rocks, than if I had stayed upon the green shore, and piped a silly pipe, and took tea and comfortable advice.

—Keats, letter to James Hessey.

* * * *

Some think me middling, others silly, others foolish. . . . I am content to be thought all this because I have in my own breast so great a resource.

—Keats, letter to George and Georgiana.

* * * *

Poetry is the journal of a sea animal living on land, wanting to fly the air.

—Carl Sandburg.

* * * *

People do not ask painters to go to places and paint pictures for nothing, but they are forever trying to graft entertainment off of poets.

—Don Marquis.

* * * *

Appendix

The vision of Christ that thou dost see
Is my vision's greatest enemy.

Thine has a great hook nose like thine;
Mine has a snub nose like to mine.

—William Blake.

* * * *

Nightingales sing onely some moneths in the
spring, but commonly are silent when they
have hatch'd their egges, as if their mirth were
turned into care for their young ones.

—Thomas Fuller, *Of Marriage*.

* * * *

While all melts under our feet, we may well
catch at any exquisite passion, or any contribu-
tion to knowledge that seems by a lifted
horizon to set the spirit free for a moment,
or any stirring of the senses, strange dyes,
strange colours, and curious odours, or work
of the artist's hands, or the face of one's friend.
Not to discriminate every moment some pas-
sionate attitude in those about us, and in the
brilliancy of their gifts some tragic dividing of
forces on their ways, is, on this short day of
frost and sun, to sleep before evening.

—Walter Pater.

* * * *

All that people sincerely believe in must be
true; it may be differently expressed but it

APPENDIX

cannot be a lie, and therefore if it presents itself to me as a lie, that only means that I have not understood it.

. . . I wish to understand in such a way that everything that is inexplicable shall present itself to me as being necessarily inexplicable, and not as being something I am under an arbitrary obligation to believe.

—Tolstoy, *A Confession*.

* * * *

Intellectual over-indulgence is the most gratuitous and disgraceful form which excess can take, nor is there any the consequences of which are more disastrous.

—Samuel Butler, *Notebooks*.

* * * *

Feeling is an art and, like any other art, can be acquired by taking pains. The analogy between feelings and words is very close. Both have their foundation in volition and deal largely in convention; as we should not be word-ridden so neither should we be feeling ridden; feelings can deceive us; they can lie; they can be used in a non-natural, artificial sense; they can be forced; they can carry us away; they can be restrained.

—Samuel Butler, *Notebooks*.

* * * *

Appendix

I like a look of agony,
Because I know it's true;
Men do not sham convulsion,
Nor simulate a throe.

—Emily Dickinson.

* * * *

Anger is one of the sinews of the soul; he
that wants it hath a maimed mind.

Be not mortally angry with any for a venial
fault. He will make a strange combustion in
the state of his soul, who at the landing of
every cockboat sets the beacons on fire.

—Thomas Fuller, *Of Anger*.

* * * *

Is it no verse except enchanted groves
And sudden arbours shadow course-spunne
lines?

Must purling streams refresh a lover's loves?

Must all be vail'd, while he that reades
divines,

Catching the sense at two removes?

—George Herbert.

* * * *

There is no excellent beauty that hath not
some strangeness in the proportion.

—Bacon.

* * * *

The visions of poets, the most solid an-
nouncements of any.

—Walt Whitman.

* * * *

APPENDIX

A poem is like a prayer; even when public, its essence is solitary. I think one likes to feel as one reads a poem that the world is shut out and that the world will end when the poem is completed.

—O. W. Firkins.

[This is not the End of the book. This is, perhaps, the Beginning. The following pages are courteously left blank, for the reader (if any) to instal his own meditations. I myself am going to use the space to paste in clippings of the critics' comments. After all, an author can only begin a book. The Conclusion, if any, is contributed by those who read it.]

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